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## **TAIZÉ A CASE STUDY**

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**King's College, London**  
**Department of Education and Professional Studies**

**TAIZÉ: A CASE STUDY**

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## **Abstract**

Pilgrimages to the Taizé Community are regularly organised by Church of England institutions as a means of aggregating and retaining young people. Every summer hundreds of youth and their leaders travel to France where this ecumenical monastic community enacts its prophetic parable of reconciliation.

While the Community's ministry to young people is designed as an instrument of its ecumenical mission, the research postulates that youth pilgrimages to Taizé are instead an arena of divergent and often competing theological interpretations; more specifically, that youth appropriate their pilgrimage experience as a vessel for spiritual and existential explorations expressing a holistic, experiential and subject-focused orientation. This represents a clear departure from the implicitly dualistic, ascetic theology developed by the Community and mediated by its practical expressions.

Using Swinton and Mowat's practical theological methodology as a framework, the study employs qualitative research methods within a case-study approach, involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews with two Anglican-sponsored youth groups. The empirical findings are subsequently analysed through the lens of pilgrimage studies.

The results confirm the initial hypothesis. Pilgrimages to Taizé create a liminal space where youth participate in an anti-structural performance designed to involve them as partners in an ecumenical undertaking. However, rather than interpreting their experience in light of the Community's theology, participants utilise pilgrimage as an embodied vehicle for self-expressive journeys aimed at re-appropriating life as a meaningful personal narrative. Taizé provides a spiritually oriented environment and a warehouse of resources that allows participants to practice a sapiential hermeneutics of everyday existence.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Several years have gone by since my first visit to the Taizé Community. My most lasting impression of this extraordinary place remains connected to the first time I experienced silence with a crowd of thousands in the Church of Reconciliation. Being part of a Christian tradition that considers silence mostly as a glitch in a programme to be filled with words that convince and push to action, I was shaken by that quiet. I felt powerless and yet grateful. I understood that I had missed God for a very long time.

Study has changed my understanding of Taizé but not the conviction that in the spiritual canopy the Community makes generously available, God reveals himself in creative, and at times, subversive ways. This study is dedicated to his unpredictable workings.

My doctoral journey has seen many life changes. These included a move from Italy to France, then to the United Kingdom, and finally to the United States, where I married. Along this uneven path my supervisor, Dr Peter Ward, has been an insightful and patient guide. To him I owe my first thanks. I am also sincerely grateful to the church leaders and young people who believed in the significance of this project and participated in it.

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# Chapter 1 - Introduction

## 1.1 Travellers and a source

Nestled among the hills of Burgundy, France, the Taizé Community began attracting young people in the early 1960s and has been doing so in increasing numbers ever since. Initially taking the small and relatively isolated monastic Community by surprise, this flow of young pilgrims imposed a reorientation on the Community's original understanding of its ecumenical mission, which came to involve young people as partners and forerunners of a reconciled Christianity (Chiron 2008; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008; Spink 2005; Brico 1982; Gonzalez-Balado 2003; Santos 2008). After five decades, Taizé hosts an average of 6,000 young people a week during the summer months (Santos 2008: 87); even more crowd its international meetings, organised at the end of every year in a major European city. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the extending of Europe's borders, and the increasing availability of cheap travel options, the number of young pilgrims visiting the Community has continued to rise (Chiron 2008: 334-36, 48-50; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 136-40).

As a youth leader temporarily working in the Haute Savoie region of France, not far from Taizé, I first visited this international ecumenical spiritual centre in the late Summer of 2002, and then repeatedly during the following years. My interest in the Community was at the same time professional and deeply personal. Professionally, I was interested in understanding young people's attraction for its specific form of contemplative spirituality; at a personal level, Taizé represented a space of encounter and dialogue that deeply resonated with my spiritual journey. This had been marked by a range of different, and sometimes contrasting, religious influences: my mother's belonging to a conservative evangelical tradition, my father's Catholic roots, the pervasive aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural influence of Catholicism during my early childhood and adolescence in Italy, and my education in the highly inclusive and intellectually creative theological environment of King's College, London. I enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to explore the Community's ecumenical spirituality and ministry to youth. This thesis incarnates my own personal journey to deepen and, in many ways, problematize my understanding of this place of spiritual encounter with God, the self, and the other.

Despite the crowds that peacefully invade the small village, life at Taizé is marked by an extraordinary continuity. Every summer Sunday the same routine takes place in the Community: big coaches climb the hill, cheered by young people who have just arrived or are about to leave



after spending a week at the Community; parking lots are filled with youth and adult leaders unloading colourful arrays of bags, mats, tents, and guitars. In the meantime, other coaches prepare to start their travel back to their home destinations throughout Europe. All this takes place under the careful supervision of the 'Brothers' and numerous young volunteers. As emphasised by Escaffit and Rasiwala, Taizé has become '*un des lieux incontournables de la pastorale de la jeunesse des diocèses et des aumôneries de lycées*',<sup>1</sup> a prominent part of the European religious landscape (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 157). In a diary of his own experience at Taizé, former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, who led a pilgrimage of 1,000 young people to Taizé in 1992, highlights the Community's '*amazing influence on all the churches in Britain*' (Carey 1994: 1). After more than a decade from what has been defined as '*the largest British crossing of the Channel after World War II*' (Casti 2009), hundreds of young people are recruited annually by Anglican dioceses and university chaplaincies all across the United Kingdom to participate in Taizé pilgrimages. A dedicated coach company ensures regular shuttle service between several cities of the United Kingdom and Taizé, crossing the Channel every week of the summer to take youth groups to the small village in the eastern-central French department of Saône-et-Loire.

Today, pilgrimages worldwide are experiencing a constant growth in popularity. This can be attributed to a variety of motivations, depending on the context. Among them would certainly be the active promotion of religious authorities (Reader 2007). In Western Europe the rediscovery of pilgrimage is often related to the contemporary crisis of institutional Churches. Within this context pilgrimage is often used as a pastoral resource to supplement a church's yearly offer of activities; this appears to be particularly true in the case of youth ministry (Margry 2008: 15, 26). Pilgrimage shrines are indeed extraordinarily flexible theological media, warehouses of religious languages, symbols, and embodied expressions (Ward 2008: 180-91; Hervieu-Léger 1999). However, they also constitute spaces of multivocal negotiation, divergent interpretations, and sometimes open competition between different theologies (Harris 2013, 2010). Mediating faith presupposes a complex interplay between the objective theology embedded in a shrine's formal representations and their subjective appropriation by a pilgrim audience (Ward 2008). In my view these observations also apply to the case of Taizé.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: '*An absolute reference for youth ministers working in dioceses and secondary school chaplaincies*'. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are those of the author.

In terms of its research question, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that youth pilgrimage, as articulated by the Taizé Community, is an arena of interaction between different and sometimes substantially divergent theological interpretations. Furthermore, the study claims that a majority of young pilgrims inhabit and appropriate their pilgrimage to Taizé as a vessel for spiritual and personal explorations whose core expresses a holistic, experiential, and subject-focused orientation. My research will also argue that this spirituality implies a significant move away from the implicitly dualistic, ascetic theology historically promoted by the Community and embedded in its mediating practices. The final aim of this thesis is to illuminate the shifting theological ground underlying young people's involvement in Church-organised pilgrimages to the Taizé Community and the potential significance of these developments for youth ministry and the Church.

As the survey of the literature (Chapter One) will make clear, a relatively large number of theses and scholarly works have been focusing on the Community's history, its ecumenical significance, as well as its spirituality, liturgy, and ministry practice. This thesis adopts a different perspective in that it makes use of a practical theological viewpoint to analyse the shift between the theology mediated by the Community and young people's subjective experience at Taizé. Therefore, my research will be oriented by a focus on the relationship between faith and practice; in the words of British practical theologians John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, it will reflect an understanding of faith as a *'faithful performance'* of the Gospel (Swinton and Mowat 2006: v-vii, 3). Such an emphasis situates this thesis in the area of theology, although its focus on practice will imply a dialogue with social sciences and pilgrimage studies to enable an in-depth exploration of faith as a living performance. More specifically, the study will adopt a case study strategy to explore the subjective experiences of two groups of young British pilgrims involved in pilgrimages organised by Anglican dioceses during the summers of 2009 and 2010. It is suggested that the findings of this research have broader implications for youth ministry and the Church.

The design of this thesis reflects Swinton and Mowat's practical theological methodology (Swinton and Mowat 2006). Starting from an initial formulation of the research question, it will proceed by adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion and questioning the taken-for-granted character of the specific Christian practice under consideration. This will imply a careful consideration of the contextual and theory-laden nature of religious performances. In this perspective, theology's task is to interrogate both the embodied enactments of the Gospel and

the traditions from which they take their roots. The ultimate purpose of this theological approach is to generate a form of life-oriented theological knowledge that may support and enhance the Church's *'faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world'* (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 6). Following Swinton and Mowat's methodology, the thesis will include four stages. In the first I will develop a preliminary exploration of the Taizé Community and its practice of ministry with young people. Thus, the survey of the literature (Chapter One) will introduce the primary and secondary sources available for the study, together with a reconstruction of the historical development of the Community. The following chapter (Chapter Two) will clarify the methodology adopted in the research, which will include practical theology and qualitative research. I will then proceed to further clarify the framework of Taizé's ministry practice with youth by reconstructing its foundational theology (Chapter Three). In both my historical reconstruction and my analysis of the Community's theology, my perspective will be oriented by the focus of this thesis. Therefore, I will give particular attention to the dynamics accompanying young people's integration as partners in the fulfilment of the Community's ecumenical mission. The second stage will engage in a contextual analysis of the practice under study—young people's pilgrimages to Taizé. This will include the use of qualitative research methods as a way to understand the complexity of this phenomenon (Chapter Four). The findings of my empirical work at the Community will be discussed from an interdisciplinary perspective involving insights drawn from the area of pilgrimage studies, a disciplinary field I will introduce in Chapter Five. The third stage will imply a more formal engagement with theology. While the previous chapters' perspective remains essentially theological, it is at this point that I will engage more formally in a reflection on the theological significance of my findings (Chapter Six). Following Swinton and Mowat's emphasis on practical theology as promoting transformation and a more faithful Christian practice, I will also highlight the implications of the study for youth ministry and the Church. This step will correspond to the fourth and final stage of Swinton and Mowat's reflective cycle.

# Chapter 1 - The Taizé Community: a literature review

## 1.1 Introduction

As anticipated in the introduction to the thesis, the purpose of this research is to explore the practice of youth pilgrimage to the Taizé Community as arena of the interplay between different theological interpretations. More specifically, the study aims to illuminate the gap between the theology mediated by the Community and young people's understandings of their experience. To fulfil such an objective, Swinton suggests as a first step gaining deeper knowledge of the context within which the practice takes place (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94). Therefore, the chapter will provide a reconstruction of the Community's origins and development. In light of the purpose of the thesis, this overview will focus on tracing the emergence of Taizé's ministry with young people; furthermore, it will integrate a survey of primary and secondary sources related to the subject under study. The ultimate objective of this chapter is to illuminate the role of the Community's ministry to youth in the overall context of its mission and to provide a preliminary understanding of the dynamics underlying its practice.

Taizé's present ministry focus on young people has emerged as a development of its core ecumenical vision. As I will show in this chapter, the current shape of this ministry integrates and brings to synthesis different theological and practical emphases gradually developed by the Community throughout its history.

A wide range of materials is available for those who want to study Taizé. Since the birth of the Community, its activities have been accompanied by a constant flow of publications. Among them Roger Schutz's writings have a particularly important place. The central role of the founder and first Prior of the Taizé Community in shaping its historical development, foundational theology, and structural organisation is unanimously acknowledged (Chiron 2008; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008; Gonzalez-Balado 2003; Restropo 1975; Santos 2008; Spink 2005). His intense writing activity constitutes an invaluable testimony of the effort he expended at different key passages of the Community's history to understand and define its vocation within the Church and in the world. The significance of these works is further accentuated by the fact that over the years Taizé has systematically destroyed any historical archive, so as to remain symbolically unencumbered by the weight of a tradition<sup>2</sup> (Schutz 1961: 30-31). This implies that, up to the

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<sup>2</sup> The absence of archives and the necessity to rely on testimonies from the Prior and the Brothers of Taizé also reflected an attempt to limit the access to information only to trusted writers, which allowed the Community to keep a

present, the Community's history and foundational theology remain intimately identified with the life and thought of its founder. It is not coincidental that most reconstructions of the Community's development take the form of biographies of Brother Roger (Chiron 2008; Brico 1982; Spink 2005; Gonzalez-Balado 1977; Feldmann 2007).

The first systematisations of the history of Taizé came with its growth in popularity, starting from the mid-1970s. These early histories generally share a set of common features: they aim to introduce and promote the Community among the general public; they are mostly based on oral testimonies and interviews with Brother Roger, members of the Community, and sometimes young pilgrims; they tend to present the development of Taizé from an insider's viewpoint, more as a spiritual parable than from a critical historical perspective; they make very little use of external sources and testimonies from individuals not involved in the circle of the Community. Their nature as systematisations of a common core source—the oral testimony and writings of the founder of Taizé—together with the fact that these early histories often build upon each other, implies that their perspectives are very similar.<sup>3</sup> These elements explain the substantial lack of disagreement and diversity of perspectives characterising the early historical reconstructions of Taizé's development<sup>4</sup> (Chiron 2008; Brico 1982; Spink 2005; Gonzalez-Balado 1977; Feldmann 2007).

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measure of control on its public image. Brother Roger particularly emphasised the importance of finding supportive authors. In a journal entry he highlights his concern that a publisher may appoint an unsympathetic author to write a book on Taizé and speaks about his efforts to orient the choice towards a trusted name (Schutz 1983a: 47).

<sup>3</sup> The first of these works was Gonzalez-Balado's short biography of Brother Roger (Gonzalez-Balado 1977). A year after Dutch journalist Rex Brico published a history of the Community, *Taizé: Brother Roger and his Community* (Brico 1978, 1982). Its main element of novelty was that its structure reflected the Community's growing integration between ecumenical activism and youth pastoral care. The significance of Taizé's ministry with young people is discussed in a long interview with Brother Roger included at the end of the volume (Brico 1982: 99-134). A new biography of Brother Roger was written at the beginning of the 1980s. The Community's reputation was then solidly established and its Prior was an internationally recognised spiritual leader. Kathryn Spink, author of previous works on inspirational figures such as John Paul II, Gandhi and Mother Teresa, wrote the most extended and successful biography of Brother Roger to-date (Spink 1986b). Her work provides important details on events and circumstances not covered by previous writers. It is based on a long series of interviews with the founder of the Community and, as such, represents an important first-hand source of information. Brother Roger's voice often surfaces in Spink's narration; her biography also largely draws from his published journals. As in her previous books, the journalist's aim is to build an inspirational portrait of a famous leader. Originally written in English and successively translated in multiple languages, Spink's book was updated in 2005 to integrate the tragic news of Brother Roger's assassination (Spink 2005). Finally, in 2008 Jean-Claude Escaffit, journalist at the French Catholic magazine *La Vie*, and Indian astrophysicist Moiz Rasiwala, a youth leader closely connected to Taizé, published a new history of the Community (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008). Their book is based on Brother Roger's writings, personal testimonies by other Taizé brothers, and articles from the archives of *La Vie*. It is addressed to a large audience and follows the model of previous accounts. As it was published three years after Brother Roger's death, its perspective tends to be less dependent on his testimony and more critical in its approach. Furthermore, it offers new and important details on Taizé's early origins and engages in an assessment of some of the most significant influences interacting with its founder's thought.

<sup>4</sup> An exception to this tendency is Jean-Marie Paupert's work, which can be considered as the first in-depth reconstruction of the early history, cultural genesis, and theological vision of the Community. Paupert's research gave particular emphasis to the spiritual principles underlying Taizé as an experiment of ecumenical unity (Paupert and Ricoeur 1967). Another early source about the thought of the founder of Taizé is the doctoral thesis of a Colombian student, Ivan Restrepo. His work, written in Spanish, constitutes an attempt at providing a systematic reconstruction of the theology underlying the Community's mission. His thesis analyses the Rule of Taizé as a foundational document and explores the theology underlying each of its spiritual pillars (Restrepo 1975).

After Brother Roger Schutz's tragic death in 2005, new studies have deepened the understanding of Taizé's history (Chiron 2008; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008; Scatena 2011). Differently from earlier accounts, some of them rely both on oral testimonies from members of the Community and on documentary research including a variety of sources internal and external to the Community. Furthermore, they seek to situate Taizé within its contemporary historical, social, and religious context.<sup>5</sup>

In light of the research question of this thesis, the literature review will now proceed to reconstruct the historical development of the Taizé Community and its ministry to young people. The history of Taizé is characterised by an extraordinary adaptability to different historical, social, and religious contexts. In this chapter the Community's development will be structured in three stages, which build upon each other in substantial continuity. Taizé's earlier foundations thus constitute the base of its progressive focusing on the current youth-oriented shape of its mission. Therefore, its ministry with young people should be considered as the product of a gradual process of adjustment and synthesis. Roger Schutz's early vision of the Community (1940-1943) was focused on the creation of a Third Order, whose mission was to revitalise French and Swiss Protestantism. This self-understanding was progressively reoriented to embrace an ecumenical vocation. The Community thus became the incarnation of a prophetic parable of universal religious and human reconciliation (1944-1965). As I will show below, with the growth of Taizé's popularity this foundational dual focus—spirituality and ecumenism—took the specific shape that today makes Taizé one of the most important international models of youth ministry.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Three years after Brother Roger's death, Catholic historian Yves Chiron published the first historiographical reconstruction of Brother Roger's life (Chiron 2008). His work breaks with the previous tradition by providing a scholarly perspective on the life of the founder of Taizé. A prolific historian specialised in the study of modern and contemporary Catholicism, Chiron based his work on the analysis of a broad range of documentary sources and testimonies. The result of his research is what is, to date, the best biography of Brother Roger available (Maxence 2008). Chiron's research provides valuable information about the cultural and theological influences underlying Roger Schutz's thought. The work includes documented analyses of the sometimes tense relationships between the Community, the French Protestant Church, and key ecumenical institutions such as the World Council of Churches; furthermore, it offers important elements for understanding the transformation experienced by the Community under the pressure of its increasing popularity among young people. In 2011 Silvia Scatena, a specialist in the study of the Second Vatican Council (Scatena 2011), published the first part of a more extensive historiographical project on the Taizé Community. Based on a considerable amount of previously unpublished materials, Scatena's research focuses on two essential transitions in the history of the Community. Her first essay focuses on the origins of Taizé by reconstructing the motivations behind Roger Schutz's project, the theological, spiritual and cultural influences leading to its birth, and the network of relationships that supported its early development. The second part of Scatena's research investigates Roger Schutz's and Max Thurian's activity during the transformative decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Scatena focuses in particular on the significance of Schutz's and Thurian's participation in the works of the Second Vatican Council. She also analyses the Community's sometimes difficult relationships with both Catholics and Protestants.

<sup>6</sup> An evidence of this international reputation was the pilgrimage organised in 1992 by George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, which involved about 1,000 youth. In his spiritual journal of the pilgrimage, Carey later reflected on the Church's failure in reaching young people. He attributed this to the Church's cold liturgies, to the use of an abstract and obscure theological language, and to the verbosity of its worship services; in his view, Taizé was a source of inspiration (Carey 1994).

## 1.2 Roger Schutz's formative years

Roger Schutz, the founder of the Taizé Community, was born in Provence, Switzerland, on the 12th of May 1915 (Spink 2005: 1). With the exception of Rex Brico, whose account gives little space to Roger Schutz's childhood (Brico 1982: 12-13) there is general agreement on the influence played by his family background in the shaping of his initial vision (Spink 2005: 29-38; Gonzalez-Balado 1977; Feldmann 2007). The significance of this influence is acknowledged by Roger Schutz himself in interviews with different biographers (Schutz 1982a: 75; 2005: 34-35; Brico 1982: 99-100, 04).

The founder of Taizé grew up in a family with solid Christian traditions. His father and both his maternal and paternal grandfathers were Swiss Reformed pastors (Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 29; Chiron 2008: 13-20). In his writings, Roger Schutz acknowledges his maternal grandmother, Louise Marsauche, as one of the key influences in shaping his understanding of the core of Christianity (Schutz 1982a: 75; 1973: 37-38). In an interview with Rex Brico, he says that when he first met her, he felt that something irreversible had changed his life (Brico 1982: 100). During the First World War, the widow Marsauche provided food and a shelter to the refugees; despite her strong Protestant roots, she decided to attend a Catholic church to embody with a symbolic act the necessity of reconciliation between Christians divided by the war. The influence of this living practice of inner reconciliation on Brother Roger's thought cannot be overstated (Schutz 1982a). The centrality of spirituality as a vehicle of human and religious reconciliation will be, in fact, among the key themes of Roger Schutz's future vocation (Schutz 2005: 90). According to his testimony, it was also from his family education, particularly from his mother, that he drew one of the key elements of his approach to the ministry with young people: a basic attitude of unconditional trust in young people (Schutz 2005: 34-35; Santos 2008: 92-93).

Roger Schutz also traced his attraction for religious community life back to his family upbringing. His mother used to read to him and his siblings a biography of Angélique Arnaud, Abbess of the monastery of Port-Royal-des-Champs and a leading figure of French Jansenism (McManners 1998: 345-52; Ranft 1996: 122-25). What particularly impressed him about her story was the possibility of creating a powerful spiritual movement through the example of a single spiritual centre. The idea of a 'parable of Community', a community acting as a prophetic symbol, first originates from his reflections on the history of Port-Royal. Young Roger was not interested in

the theological aspects of the Jansenist controversy but in the spiritual influence exerted by those women living together as a community (Brico 1982: 104). In his words:

*Si ces quelques femmes peu nombreuses, répondant à une vocation commune dans la clarté et donnant leur vie à cause du Christ, ont eu un tel rayonnement d'Évangile, quelques hommes, réunis dans une communauté, ne le pourraient-ils pas aussi?*<sup>7</sup>  
(Schutz 2001: 34-35)

Among the most significant experiences of his early adolescence, the future Prior of Taizé also included the accounts of missionaries coming from Africa, which gave him a sense of the universality of the Church (Schutz 2005: 53). Furthermore, during these years he developed a special appreciation for Catholic spirituality (Schutz 1985: 32; Chiron 2008: 30).

In 1928 Roger Schutz started his secondary studies and moved to a town not far from his family's home. It was here that he underwent a deep religious crisis. He did not question God's existence, but he could not feel it as having any relationship with him as a person (Schutz 2001: 63). According to Ivan Restropo and Kathryn Spink (Restropo 1975: 25; Spink 2005: 18), these doubts were possibly connected with his leaving a religiously 'safe' context to come into contact with a reality that forced him to define his faith convictions apart from his family's influence. Later in his life, as he declared in an interview (Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 35), this difficult transition had a significant influence in helping him sympathise with young people's radical questions about faith. In my view the explanation provided by Spink and Restropo constitutes a solid hypothesis. In his writings the founder of Taizé provides a vivid picture of his difficult relationship with his father and describes how, despite attempts to share his spiritual struggle, he was forced to meet the paternal expectations and participate in his first Communion at age sixteen. As an adult and a spiritual leader, the memory of this deep suffering led him to insist on the necessity to restore trust and respect for those young people whose spiritual questing is often ignored or even hurt and humiliated by adults (Schutz 1970b: 52; Chiron 2008: 34-35).

During this difficult transition Roger Schutz fell seriously ill for several months (Chiron 2008: 37-39; Feldmann 2007: 19-20; Spink 2005: 19-20). As he narrates in his journals, these challenges had a crucial importance in shaping his determination to create a community of men who would be a spiritual example for others. His health problems influenced his inclination for a spirituality made of silence, contact with nature, meditation on short and simple phrases, search for peace, and times of solitude (Schutz 2005: 14-15). It is also at this time that he started journaling and

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<sup>7</sup> Translation: 'If by accepting a common, clear calling and by giving their life to Christ a few women could give such a powerful testimony of the Gospel, could it be possible for some men united as a community to do the same?'



that a passion for literature and writing emerged in him. At the end of his secondary studies, after a slow recovery from tuberculosis, he determined to become either a writer or to create 'a *parable of community*' (Schutz 1982a: 41). The negative outcome of the submission of his first autobiographic novel (*Une jeunesse puritaine*, which he later destroyed) to the prestigious *Nouvelle Revue Française* decided his future, even though throughout his life he continued to cultivate his passion for writing.

Roger Schutz's biographers (Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 36-37; Brico 1982: 14; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 17; Scatena 2011: 21-27) attribute his decision to start studying theology to his father's pressures, as he wanted him to follow his family's tradition and become a pastor. However, as highlighted by Chiron (Chiron 2008: 42-43) and by Roger Schutz's own statements (Brico 1982: 108), he never actually considered becoming a pastor. This period had a key importance in defining the theological and practical shape of his parable of community (Scatena 2011: 27-99). In 1938, during his second year at the Faculté Libre de Théologie of Lausanne, the future Prior of Taizé started studying the spiritual rules of St. Benedict, St. Francis, and St. Ignatius Loyola (Restropo 1975: 34-35; Chiron 2008: 47). The third year of his studies was spent at the prestigious Faculté de Théologie Protestante of Strasbourg. This experience was extremely influential on his thought. A specific feature of students' life in this faculty was that students were lodged in the same dormitory and followed a specific programme under the guidance of a spiritual director (Chiron 2008: 49). It was Roger Schutz's first experience of community life, which followed a model similar to that adopted in the same years by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's seminary at Finkenwalde (Rakoczy 2007).

According to Chiron and Escaffit (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 18-25; Chiron 2008: 48-50), during his studies in Strasbourg, Roger Schutz started reading the writings of Wilfred Monod, professor of Practical Theology at the Protestant Faculty of Paris (Encrevé 1993: 351-52). Through them the young student came in contact with the tradition of the French Protestant Réveil, a Pietist movement inaugurated in the XIX century by Frédéric and Adolphe Monod (Encrevé 1993: 347-48), which strongly influenced the early beginnings of Taizé.<sup>8</sup> Wilfred Monod was an early pioneer of ecumenism and a leading figure of Social Christianity in France. In 1923 he founded *Les Veilleurs*, a Protestant Third Order (Encrevé 1993: 351-52). *Les*

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<sup>8</sup> The first presentation of the rule of the *Communauté de Cluny* (early name of the Taizé Community) can be found in his *Communauté de Cluny. Notes explicatives* (Schutz 1941). It is the first book written by Roger Schutz and its aim is to introduce and promote the project of the Community among possible followers. The text presents close similarities with the rule of Monod's *Les Veilleurs*.

*Veilleurs* were, in fact, not a community living together but rather a spiritual brotherhood involving both lay people and clergy, open to any age, gender, and social category. The Order tried to integrate structured individual piety and social commitment. Its followers did not leave their occupations to embrace a monastic calling but rather tried to apply the basic principles of their rule to their everyday life. Following the spirit of the Beatitudes, they were required to cultivate inner joy, practice their Christian commitment by showing mercy and solidarity to others, and recognise the universality of the Christian calling against all denominational barriers (Monod 1938: 332-38; 1924). Monod critiqued contemporary Protestantism for its scant attention to spiritual formation and the need of a structured spirituality, which in his view were necessary to support the average believer. He suggested the creation of communities for young men or women who would continue living their usual lives but would commit to observing a basic spiritual rule (Monod 1924). Roger Schutz's professor of Practical Theology at Strasbourg, Jean-Daniel Benoit, shared a similar concern for the need to establish a Protestant tradition of spiritual formation (Benoit 1940).

Beyond these influences, Chiron and Escaffit (Chiron 2008: 56-57; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 23-26) appropriately point out that the second half of the 1930s saw a rise of interest in community life among Protestants. In Switzerland, not far from Lausanne where the young Roger studied, a group of Protestant women previously involved in Monod's *Les Veilleurs* founded the Community of Grandchamps, which adopted the rule of Taizé in 1952 (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 25). In 1938, two years before the birth of Taizé, George McLeod founded the ecumenical Iona Community (Ferguson 1998: 38-55); between 1935 and 1938 Dietrich Bonhoeffer started the Finkenwalde experience (De Gruchy 1999: 35-39). Bonhoeffer's work '*Life Together*' (Bonhoeffer 1996) was published in 1939, subsequent to the closing of Finkenwalde and just one year before Roger Schutz's decision to give life to his idea of a student-based spiritual community, *La Grande Communauté*.

The early connections between the Community of Grandchamps and the founder of Taizé have been known for decades (Chiron 2008: 57-58). In more recent times, however, an article suggested the idea of a possible relationship between the birth of the Taizé Community and Bonhoeffer's experiment at Finkenwalde (Rakoczy 2007). Rakoczy highlights the existence of parallels between Bonhoeffer's theology of community life and Taizé's foundational principles,

as described in Brother Roger's early writings (Schutz 1944) and in later elaborations of the rule of Taizé<sup>9</sup> (Schutz 1954).

Alsace was just at the border between France and Germany, and with the new academic year 1939-1940 the Faculté de Théologie Protestante of Strasbourg was forced to suspend any activity because of the war (Chiron 2008: 55). Roger Schutz came back to the Faculté Libre de Théologie of Lausanne, Switzerland, where the opportunity to apply Monod's and Benoit's ideas about spirituality was soon provided. Roger Schutz was appointed as president of the local university's student union. In this role he gathered a group of twenty students willing to be part of a spiritual community, *La Grande Communauté*, designed on the model of Monod's *Les Veilleurs* (Brico 1982: 13). According to Roger Schutz,

*Il s'agissait pour nous de rompre avec une tradition trop individualiste, afin d'user pleinement des richesses engendrées par la collaboration – et même par la vie communautaire [...] Tenter de former une communauté vivant dans le monde, communauté où chaque membre fût lié par sa foi en Christ et par son adhésion à certaines règles, voilà l'appel qui pour quelques uns devint irrésistible.*<sup>10</sup> (Schutz 1941: 3)

In line with Monod's critique of Protestant spirituality, Roger Schutz and the students of his *Grande Communauté* felt called to break with the individualistic spiritual tradition of Protestantism and take advantage of the spiritual riches made available by community life. The

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<sup>9</sup> According to Rakoczy (Rakoczy 2007), who refers to the testimony of Brother John of Taizé, Roger Schutz read *Life Together* and was inspired by it. In Rakoczy's view the experiences and thought of Bonhoeffer and Brother Roger present interesting analogies. Bonhoeffer drew inspiration from a visit to various Anglican communities in England in the early 1930s; Brother Roger's project was also influenced by a similar visit, about a decade later. Bonhoeffer considered the experience of community life as a preparation for his students to be ministers under the Nazi rule. In his view the times required the training of seminarians to take place not in a university context but in 'church-monastic schools' where the Sermon of the Mount, worship, and theology could be taken seriously. In Rakoczy's view, this understanding presents parallels with Brother Roger's thinking on the significance of community life during the war. However, I would argue that while the emphasis on the practice of the 'Spirit of the Beatitudes' is common to both Bonhoeffer and Brother Roger, the early Taizé Community was primarily a Third Order promoting structured patterns of spiritual practice among Protestant lay people. The idea of spirituality as a space of political 'resistance' is never articulated in Brother Roger's thought, even if in his view spiritual commitment can never be divorced from actions in favour of the poor and the persecuted. For Rakoczy, a further element of similarity between Bonhoeffer and Brother Roger is their critique of the Protestant rejection of monasticism after Luther. Writing from positions very close to those defended by Roger Schutz in his dissertation, Bonhoeffer believed that the restoration of the Church depended on the promotion of a new monasticism, as a form of absolute commitment to the spiritual and ethical implications of the Sermon on the Mount. Furthermore, according to Rakoczy, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on spirituality had strong practical implications, as only through it could Christians develop an unselfish spiritual love for the other, and thus resist the Nazi ideology. For Brother Roger, spirituality and commitment to defend the persecuted were also inseparable. In my view, the two projects – Finkenwalde and Taizé – were nurtured by the same debate on the role of spirituality in Protestantism, influenced by the heritage of Pietism. Their strongest elements of similarity are the emphasis on the message of the Sermon on the Mount (Bonhoeffer) or the 'Spirit of the Beatitudes' (Schutz), the importance of structured spiritual life, and the connection between spirituality and practical commitment. For both of them, the key to revitalise the Church and promote its radical faithfulness was the birth of a new form of monasticism. However, the two experiences also present deep differences. One of the most important is certainly rooted in the very nature of the two projects. Finkenwalde was a seminary for pastors, and Bonhoeffer emphasised the role of theological reflection in spirituality. The Taizé Community was born, instead, as a Third Order aimed to promote spiritual practice among the laity and revitalise the Church. For Brother Roger, the emphasis on personal spirituality and practical action had priority over theology, which he considered with a mixed attitude of interest and suspicion for the divisions it could create in ecumenical dialogue.

<sup>10</sup> Translation: 'Our objective was to break with an excessively individualistic tradition and fully take advantage of the spiritual riches involved in cooperating and living as a community [...] This idea of creating a community where each member was connected to the other by his faith in Christ and by his acceptance of a certain set of rules was something that irresistibly attracted us'.

new entity was constituted as a series of concentric circles. These included a core group of resident members sharing life at Taizé to ensure the continuity of the project and a larger circle of people living in the world to fertilise it by their example. The connection between the core and the broader circle and among all members was ensured by their common adherence to a basic spiritual rule (Schutz 1941). In 1940 the group decided it needed a house in which to meet and live together (Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 18). The Taizé Community—or the *Communauté de Cluny*, as it was initially named after the famous abbey nearby—was about to be founded.

### **1.3 The foundations of Taizé: spiritual renewal and practical commitment (1940-1943)**

To find a suitable property, Roger visited the French region just across the border with Switzerland. The country was devastated by the war, and Taizé was a poor little village just beyond the border with Nazi-occupied France. Far from conceiving spirituality as isolation from suffering and danger, his aim was to make the new community present right at the heart of despair (Schutz 1985: 15). Ever since then, this double inspiration—spirituality and commitment to make the earth a better place to live in—has represented one of the basic foundations of the Community's mission (Schutz 2005: 90). The first stage of Taizé's development closely follows Monod's dual focus: emphasis on personal and corporate spirituality and deep commitment to practice solidarity and compassion. In Roger's view, this commitment represented a form of human resistance to the barbarity of the war (Schutz 1985: 15; Rakoczy 2007).

From 1940 to 1942 the activities of the new community, initially constituted with Roger Schutz as the only permanent resident in the house, had two goals: organising regular meetings to allow non-resident members to meet at Taizé and helping Resistance fighters, war refugees, and Jews to cross the border to Switzerland (Chiron 2008: 65-67; Spink 2005: 43-44; Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 47-48; Brico 1982: 16-17). To promote his community, the founder of Taizé contacted a supporter of *Les Veilleurs* and a pioneer of ecumenism in France, the Abbé Couturier.<sup>11</sup> Couturier encouraged the project and started to promote it among his ecumenical

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<sup>11</sup> The Abbé Couturier was one of the founders of the *Groupe des Dombes*, a leading ecumenical circle in which the Taizé Community was soon involved. At the time ecumenism was not openly supported in Catholic circles; in 1928 Pius XI had published the encyclical letter *Mortalium animos*, by which he forbade Catholics to participate in ecumenical activities. The encyclical letter emphasised that coming back to the only true Church, the Catholic Church, was the only way to ecumenism; ecumenism was a 'Protestant matter' (Gros, McManus, and Riggs 1998: 28-32; Bliss 1999: 25-26). Couturier's position was significantly different: he considered doctrinal unity as impossible, in the short term, but was committed to work to facilitate spiritual ecumenism, which involved learning to pray and act together.

network. Furthermore, he persuaded Roger Schutz to spread his ideas through a pamphlet, which today can be considered as the foundational text of Taizé (Chiron 2008: 65; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 28-29). The *Notes explicatives* (Schutz 1941) are, in fact, the first work published by the future Prior of the Community. They contain the foundational core upon which all the following re-elaborations of the rule of the Community were built. After a short historical preamble, Roger Schutz introduces the rule of the *Grande Communauté*, the name of the broader circle of students he had created. This community will live 'in the world', but its members will follow an inner spiritual discipline. In this presentation the idea of a resident community living at Taizé is not articulated yet. The motto of the Community is '*Ora et labora ut regnet*', a direct quote from St. Benedict's rule, to which Roger Schutz added '*ut regnet*' to emphasise the aim of prayer ('*ora*') and action ('*labora*'). The guiding principles presented in this pamphlet echo the rule of *Les Veilleurs*, which is quoted. They include an emphasis on Bible reading as source of inspiration for prayer and action, the necessity of cultivating internal silence and Christ's inner presence, and the exhortation to actively practice the spirit of the Beatitudes, which consists of joy, compassion, and simplicity. These foundations still represent the essential core of the rule of Taizé. Regular times of corporate spiritual retreat are considered as a necessary part of the commitment of each member of the *Grande Communauté*. This is presented as a group of Christian intellectuals practicing spiritual disciplines and regularly participating in meetings and study groups under the leadership of a spiritual supervisor. Their activities included the organisation of symposiums and the publication of articles and books. Besides these commitments, each member also had to submit to the authority of the head of the Community, whose prerogatives (leadership, admission of the members, appointment of his successor) remain very similar across the decades (Schutz 1954, 1944, 1966; Schutz and Taizé 1980). The 1944 edition of the rule, however, signals a change in this organisation. The section concerning the non-resident circle is reduced (Schutz 1944), to eventually disappear by the mid-1950s, with the transformation of Taizé from a Protestant Third Order into a residential monastic community.

It was also during these years that the essential foundations of Taizé's distinctive liturgy were laid. Roger Schutz's *Notes explicatives* circulated in nearby Switzerland. This allowed him to meet the co-founder of the Community, Max Thurian, a student at the Protestant Theology

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This form of ecumenism was, in his view, symbolic and prophetic, as it could pave the way for other forms of unity (Clifford 2005).

Faculty of Geneva. The future theologian of Taizé was strongly interested in the area of Protestant liturgical renewal. Max Thurian was in contact with the Swiss Protestant group *Eglise et liturgie*, which influenced the development of Taizé's liturgy. The founder of the group, Richard Paquier, was a Reformed pastor and a member of the ecumenical *Groupe des Dombes* (Vischer 2003: 49-50; Byars 2005: 53). Starting from the early 1930s, Paquier promoted a movement of renewal emphasising the necessity to reform Protestant liturgy, which in their view was caught between the two extremes of emotional Pietism and intellectual aridity.<sup>12</sup> The renewal encouraged by *Eglise et liturgie* followed an ecumenical inspiration. Its objective was not a return to the Roman Catholic Church but a re-appropriation of the early Christian sources, as they referred to a time when the Church was truly 'catholic' and undivided. Roger Schutz and Max Thurian shared this concept of ecumenism (Schutz and Thurian 1946). *Eglise e liturgie* elaborated a collection called *Office divin de l'Eglise universelle*, which gathered elements from the Catholic Book of Hours, the Huguenot Psalter, the Anglican Prayer Book, and the Orthodox liturgy (Vischer 2003: 49-50; Byars 2005: 53; Bradshaw 2002: 85). Under Max Thurian's impulse, Paquier's *Office* was adopted at Taizé (Chiron 2008: 75-78).

Besides its key role in promoting the early project of the Taizé Community and facilitating Brother Roger's contacts with Richard Paquier, the *Groupe des Dombes* also provided qualified support to the Community by integrating Roger Schutz and Max Thurian in a network of prominent church leaders and theologians (Chiron 2008: 76-77; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 30-31). Among them were the founder of the *Groupe*, the Abbé Couturier (a very influential figure in Catholic circles); Jean De Saussure (theologian and Reformed pastor of Geneva's Saint Pierre cathedral); Roland De Pury (also a Reformed pastor, theologian, and lecturer at the Faculté de Théologie Protestante of Geneva); Henri De Lubac (French Catholic theologian and lecturer at the Faculté de Théologie de l'Université Catholique of Lyon) (Clifford 2005: 105-18). For many years Taizé had a leading role in the editing and publication of the theological review of the group, *Verbum Caro* (Paupert and Ricoeur 1967: 67; Chiron 2008: 109-10), one of the most important voices in the French ecumenical debate. Taizé's involvement in the *Group of Dombes* significantly contributed to the progressive refocusing of its identity from Protestant Third Order to ecumenical Community, as we will see below.

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<sup>12</sup> A similar critique is developed in a book written by Max Thurian, in 1946. According to Thurian, with the Protestant schism the Reformers excluded or tended to neglect an entire spiritual and liturgical tradition that could have been beneficial for the faithful. Consequent to this, Brother Roger affirms in a section of Thurian's book that the revitalisation of Protestant liturgy will be among the aims of the new Community (Thurian and Leenhardt 1946: 7).

In 1942 Roger Schutz was reported to the French police for his involvement in helping refugees and Jews. This forced him to flee to Geneva, where he spent two years, until 1944 (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 31; Feldmann 2007: 28-29; Spink 2005: 44; Paupert and Ricoeur 1967: 61). Despite these difficult circumstances, the circle of the Community continued to meet and grow, supported by the pastor of Geneva's Protestant cathedral, Jean De Saussure. At the same time, it continued raising significant interest among local Reformed Church organisations, in Swiss theological circles and among pastors (Paupert and Ricoeur 1967: 61-62). During his exile in Geneva, the founder of Taizé finished his studies and was ordained as a Reformed pastor (Chiron 2008: 84-89). At the end of his four-year theology degree (1943), he defended a dissertation that represented the final stage of a personal effort of theological clarification related to the historical and theological identity of his project (Paupert and Ricoeur 1967: 62-63). The study also constituted a strategic contribution to the promotion of his project among Swiss Reformed circles (Chiron 2008: 83-87; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 33-34). The title of the dissertation was *L'idéal monacal jusqu'à saint Benoît (VI siècle) et sa conformité avec l'Evangile*<sup>13</sup> (Schutz 1943). The work is a plea for a Protestant monasticism. In it Roger Schutz discusses the reasons why Protestantism—and Luther in particular—broke with a corrupted monastic tradition. His claim is that contemporary Protestantism should consider reintroducing a tradition of community life, as this would answer the spiritual needs and aspirations of many serious believers. The primary aim of this reform would be the creation of 'community houses' led by resident members, whose task would consist in ensuring the continuity of participants' activities and in facilitating structured forms of communal spiritual life. The dissertation also suggests the possibility of creating travelling communities attached to a main one, as Taizé will do with in the future with the establishment of small communities of Brothers in different parts of the world. At this stage, the role of resident members becomes more important. In Roger's view, Christians need symbols and leading examples as a prefiguration, a 'parable' of the Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> In order to translate into practice the principles defended in his dissertation, Roger Schutz—towards the end of his Swiss exile—wrote his first book, *Introduction à la vie communautaire* (Schutz 1944), which was published by the prestigious Protestant publishing house Labor et

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<sup>13</sup> Translation: 'The monastic ideal from the origins to St Benedict and its conformity with the Gospel'.

<sup>14</sup> This terminology is still present in the pledge pronounced by the new members of the Community: 'Le Seigneur Christ, dans la compassion et dans l'amour qu'il a de toi, t'a choisi pour être dans l'Eglise un signe de l'amour fraternel. Il t'appelle à réaliser avec tes frères la parabole de la communauté' (Schutz and Taizé 1980: 101). Translation: 'In his compassion and love for you Christ the Lord has chosen you to be a sign of brotherly love within the Church. He calls you to realise with your brothers a parable of community'.

Fides of Geneva (Chiron 2008: 83-84). The book expanded on the short pamphlet published in 1941 (Schutz 1941) and constitutes the first comprehensive presentation of the nature and aims of the Community. The work is addressed both to 'intellectuals' (university lecturers, clergy, and students) and the working class to involve them in a conversation concerning the goals and mission of the new Community. The Community is still presented as a Third Order, with a core group of resident members ensuring continuity and a larger number of non-resident affiliates. The book reaffirms the core principles already stated in the *Notes explicatives* and integrates elements from Roger Schutz's dissertation, including a discussion of Luther's position on monastic life in which he argued that the Reformer had no objection to the principle of monastic life. The basic commitments required to the resident members of the community are the practice of joyful poverty and the sharing of any belongings. Celibacy and marriage are both seen as equally worthy callings from God; therefore, celibacy is not requested. At this stage ecumenism is not a prominent part of Taizé's mission. The book is written from the perspective of an ongoing dialogue between the Community and Swiss Protestant circles, at a time in which Roger Schutz tried to overcome possible resistances and promote his project in that specific setting. His objective was to contribute to the renewal of Protestant spirituality by creating communities focused on personal spiritual discipline, missionary commitment, and work in favour of the poor and oppressed.

These are also the lines along which the life of the Taizé Community developed in the years 1945-1949, which were characterised by the organisation of spiritual meetings and by initiatives in favour of war orphans and German prisoners in France. It was also during these post-war years, however, that ecumenical involvement became increasingly central to the Community's identity (Chiron 2008: 97-119). The emphasis on recruiting and maintaining a Third Order progressively waned, and the core resident group became the real axis of Taizé's mission, as incarnation of a parable of human and religious reconciliation. In the following section, I will show how after the failure of the hope in a near and visible reconciliation of the Church, Taizé will reinterpret its ecumenical vocation from a broader perspective, following the conviction that reconciliation can only emerge from a broader spiritual and practical commitment to human brotherhood. This emphasis on spirituality and ecumenical commitment will remain at the core of Taizé's ministry during the last, gradual refocusing of Taizé's ministry on a new audience: young people.



## 1.4 Taizé and ecumenism (1944-1965)

Starting from 1944, the Taizé Community became progressively more active in the *Groupe des Dombes*. During the second half of the 1940s, the Community multiplied its ecumenical contacts, particularly with the Catholic Church (Chiron 2008: 100-03). An article co-signed by Roger Schutz and Max Thurian presented their view of ecumenism at that time as essentially practical and spiritual (Schutz and Thurian 1946). As I will further illustrate in Chapter Three, this position echoed Couturier's own view of spiritual ecumenism and did not imply a lack of interest for theological debates, in which Taizé actively participated (Schutz and Thurian 1946). However, these discussions were not seen as a reliable vehicle to unity, which in Schutz's and Thurian's view could only be achieved through a process of spiritual conversion (Schutz and Thurian 1946). Christian Churches had to re-centre their focus on Christ and the sources of early Christianity to build a truly universal Church. This perspective did not involve a coming back to Roman Catholicism but, rather, the building of a truly ecumenical Church of which Catholicism would be only a component.<sup>15</sup> In the same article, the Taizé Community affirmed its specific calling as an agent of unity within the Protestant context (Schutz and Thurian 1946).

In those years ecumenism was entering a difficult transition. In 1948 the Catholic Church refused to join the World Council of Churches; the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office published an exhortation or *Monitum* by which it forbade any Catholic to attend ecumenical meetings concerning matters of faith, unless authorised by a specific appointment of the bishop (Oliver 1999: 34-37; Chiron 2008: 118-19). As a response to these measures, Max Thurian wrote an article to suggest the creation of an unofficial commission led by the Vatican and composed of Catholic and non-Catholic theologians, with the task of cooperating in the writing of an encyclical letter on ecumenical reconciliation (Thurian 1948a). Thurian submitted his article to the Archbishop of Lyon, Cardinal Gerlier, who brought it to Rome and presented it to Cardinal Montini (future Pope Paul VI), Vatican's Secretary of State (Chiron 2008: 118-19). This was the beginning of a long series of contacts between Taizé and the Holy See. In 1945, in cooperation with Couturier—the leader of the *Groupe des Dombes*—Taizé started organizing regular exchanges with representatives of other monastic traditions and particularly with the Franciscan order, whose spirituality Roger Schutz felt was particularly close to that of Taizé.<sup>16</sup> In 1946 Max Thurian published the first of a series of books in which he attempted a theological

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<sup>15</sup> This view of ecumenism followed the inspiration of Wilfred Monod's *Les Veilleurs* (Villain and Latreille 1957: 155).

<sup>16</sup> Together with St. Benedict's, St. Francis rule is explicitly mentioned as one of the sources of Taizé's rule in (Thurian).

mediation between the Catholic and the Protestant positions concerning the Holy Communion (Thurian and Leenhardt 1946; Thurian 1959; Thurian, Schutz, and Taizé 1967). In the same period (1945-1949), the Taizé Community started rethinking its structure (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 46-48; Chiron 2008: 107-08; 40-41). Fearing the birth of a Taizé movement, the Community refocused its identity by reducing the weight of its Third Order and by reorganising its structure as that of a Protestant monastery of permanent residents. In 1949, during a simple ceremony, the seven brothers of Taizé took a lifelong vow to poverty, sharing of any property, and celibacy. Previous to this formal commitment, this vow was renewed every year. While raising considerable controversy in Protestant circles, the Community's adoption of a practice consonant with the Catholic tradition, such as lifelong celibacy, led Pope Pius XII to consider with favour the possibility of opening ecumenical exchanges with Taizé (Chiron 2008: 105).

In an attempt to solve the impasse created by the Catholic refusal to join the World Council of Churches (Gros, McManus, and Riggs 1998: 28-32), the Archbishop of Lyon decided to arrange meetings between Protestant personalities and Pope Pius XII. Two of them involved Roger Schutz and Max Thurian. During the first visit in 1949, Roger Schutz became a friend of Cardinal Montini.<sup>17</sup> The second visit took place in 1950, just as Pius XII was about to publish the dogma of Mary's assumption into heaven, which involved recourse to his infallibility. This step threatened to become an obstacle to dialogue with the other Churches, yet Roger Schutz's mediating attempts could not stop Pius XII from publishing the dogma.<sup>18</sup>

This situation of paralysis radically changed when cardinal Roncalli, former French Nuncio, was appointed as the new Pope with the name of John XXIII. Only a few months after his election in 1959, John XXIII announced his plan to summon an ecumenical Council, the second in Catholic history. Observers from other Churches were invited to actively participate in this event (Alberigo and Komonchak 1995: 491-93). Among them were representatives of the Taizé Community. The experience of the Second Vatican Council had a crucial role not only in further defining the Community's ecumenical mission but also in extending its network of contacts. Not coincidentally, these years were also marked by a peak in Brother Roger's publishing activity.

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<sup>17</sup> A few months after this meeting, the Congregation of the Holy Office published a new instruction in which ecumenical meetings were allowed under strict conditions (Gros, McManus, and Riggs 1998: 28-32).

<sup>18</sup> This paralysis was further aggravated in 1954-1955 by the Vatican's condemnation of the worker-priest movement and Yves Congar's theology. Taizé sympathised with the movement and shared its vision; some brothers went to work with the miners of Montceau-les-Mines, and the Community helped to organise mutual companies of farmers. Furthermore, Taizé donated its land to the farmers and supported the creation of land trusts operated by them; the Community also supported actions in defence of workers' rights (Chiron 2008: 143-44; Horn and Gerard 2001: 135-41, 77).

His works follow the high tide of ecumenical hope raised by the leadership of Pope John XXIII and its progressive decline in the aftermath of the Council (Schutz 1959, 1962a; Schutz and Taizé 1965). Thus, only weeks after the announcement of this event, Roger Schutz explained his view of ecumenism in an interview released to the prestigious French newspaper *Le Monde*:

*Par la vocation monastique, nous avons délibérément plongé nos racines en deçà de la Réforme, nous avons tenté un retour aux sources. Sur un foyer monastique comme le notre, qui assure la continuité, doivent pouvoir se briser les vagues d'enthousiasme et de scepticisme dans la recherche de l'unité chrétienne.*<sup>19</sup> (Fesquet 1959)

Following this inspiration, in the months after the election of John XXIII, the Community elaborated a long 'memorandum' for the Pope. Its essential elements are reported by Brico (Brico 1982: 68-69). The document emphasised the expectations raised by the Council in the Protestant setting. Among them we find the search for visible unity and the request for a change in the language of Catholic ecumenism:

*Nous savons que l'Eglise catholique professe qu'elle a conservé l'unité voulue par le Christ. Il ne nous appartient pas ici de juger cette conviction. Cependant il faut avouer que la manière d'affirmer cette unité est souvent blessante pour les non-catholiques. Lorsque l'Eglise catholique exprime l'unité de tous les chrétiens en terme de 'retour', elle bloque immédiatement tout dialogue. Ne serait-il pas possible d'employer un langage qui implique les idées de 'marche en avant' ou d' 'accomplissement' ?*<sup>20</sup> (Brico 1982: 68)

The document praised John XXIII's openness to reconsider the past from the perspective of a shared responsibility for the schism. Furthermore, it insisted on the importance of a rigorous separation between secular and spiritual power and on the need to focus the action of the Church on those who were thirsty for justice, thus implicitly advocating a reconsideration of the Vatican's decisions regarding French theologian Yves Congar and the movement of the worker-priests. The final appeal contained an implicit reference to the fracture opened by Pius XII's recourse to papal infallibility in 1950, and it asked for a more precise definition of the role of the Church, the bishops, and the Council in decisions concerning the proclamation of dogmas.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Translation: 'In our monastic calling we have deliberately planted our roots in the traditions preceding the Protestant Reformation. We have tried a return to the sources. In the search for Christian unity a monastic home like ours, which guarantees a continuity of spiritual effort, must be able to break the waves of enthusiasm and scepticism'.

<sup>20</sup> Translation: 'We know that the Catholic Church claims that it has preserved the unity Christ desired. It is not our task here to pronounce a judgement on this conviction. Nevertheless we need to confess that the way the Catholic Church affirms this unity is often hurtful for non-Catholics. When the Catholic Church articulates the unity of all Christians in terms of "return" it immediately stops all dialogue. Would it be possible to use a language implying the idea of "progress" and "fulfilment"?'.

<sup>21</sup> In 1959, the year of John XXIII's announcement of the Second Vatican Council, Roger Schutz broke a fifteen-year silence as a writer to publish a new book, *Vivre l'aujourd'hui de Dieu* (Schutz 1959). Its aim was to affirm the necessity for all Churches to undergo a phase of *aggiornamento*. This updating was made urgent by the missional challenge of reaching the rapidly changing society of the post-war decades. Schutz's reflection follows two lines of development: on the one side, he emphasises the necessity for Christians to keep an attentive look on the changing reality of the world; on the other, he highlights the importance of spirituality as vehicle of ecumenical progress. The final part of the book focuses on the prophetic role of the parable represented by Taizé, whose vocation is defined by three signs: poverty, celibacy and submission to the authority of the Prior. The Community thus embodies the qualities of the ideal

During the two years before the start of the Council, Taizé's action followed three lines consistent with the orientations expressed in the memorandum for the Pope: intensification of ecumenical exchanges with Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans, and the Orthodox; creation of a centre for sociological studies, by which Taizé intended to promote a more just society; dissemination of Brothers in poor regions of France and of the world (Algeria and Ivory Coast) to be present at the most difficult crossroads of contemporary society.<sup>22</sup>

In 1962 Roger Schutz and Max Thurian were officially invited to attend the Council as observers. This category of participants included fifty-four people either appointed by their Churches or personally invited by the organisation of the Council, as in the case of Taizé's representatives (Alberigo and Komonchak 1995: 491-93). The newly constituted Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity actively pursued their involvement by regularly gathering them for feedback on the debates and by making sure their views were communicated to the working commissions. At a more informal but not less effective level, the observers were strongly encouraged to provide suggestions and critiques to the Council Fathers. Taizé was particularly involved in this kind of networking, and for three years during the Council, hundreds of bishops, theologians, and journalists were invited to share a meal and exchange with the Brothers of Taizé at their apartment in Rome (Chiron 2008: 182; Alberigo and Komonchak 1995: 491-93). Historians unanimously consider the Council as a turning point in the Community's historical development (Brico 1982: 22-23; Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 71-75; Chiron 2008: 179-99; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 63-77). Taizé's intense ecumenical exchanges considerably increased its contacts and visibility among hundreds of bishops, non-Catholic church leaders, and press representatives at international level. The number of visitors, and especially young people, received by the Community during the three years of the Council considerably increased, and Taizé acquired a worldwide reputation (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 76-77).

Among the most noteworthy contributions of Taizé to the work of the Council was its involvement in the debates concerning liturgical renewal, mission, and ecumenism and in the

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Church, which he will outline in following works: poor, radical in its commitment, and spiritually united under the pastoral leadership of the Pope.

<sup>22</sup> A missionary emphasis and the urgency of ecumenical unity as a condition to reach society dominate Brother Roger's concerns in *L'unité, espérance de vie*, published in 1962, the year of the Council's opening (Schutz 1962a). Ecumenical reconciliation and missional credibility involve a spiritual journey of personal and corporate conversion. The book includes Brother Roger's reflections on the missiological rationale of the Community's liturgy.

elaboration of the constitution *Dei Verbum*<sup>23</sup> on the relationship between the Scriptures and tradition. Max Thurian participated in the elaboration of this document with Yves Congar and Oscar Cullmann, who was invited as an observer. Roger Schutz was involved in the debate on the reforms concerning ecclesiology and supported the proposals about a new balance of authority between the Pope and the bishops, decentralisation, the involvement of lay people, and the ordination of deacons. In his view, such reforms could potentially empty the Protestant Reformation of its meaning and bring back Christianity to unity (Chiron 2008: 194; Paupert and Ricoeur 1967: 182-84).

One of the most significant and durable relationships built by Taizé during the Council involved two Latin American bishops, the Chilean Manuel Larraín and the Brazilian Dom Helder Camara. Camara was the president of the National Conference of the Brazilian Bishops for twelve years. Together with Manuel Larraín, he founded in 1955 the CELAM, the international conference of Latin American bishops, which saw the emergence of Latin American liberation theology (Smith 1991: 81-83; Gill 1998: 135). Schutz's cooperation with CELAM started after his first meetings with Larraín and Camara at the Council in 1962.<sup>24</sup> In the following years, Taizé led several international projects involving Western Christian churches in actions against poverty and social inequality, and for the evangelisation of Latin America (Chiron 2008: 187-88; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 70-72).

Between the first and the second session of the Council, John XXIII died. This event represented a significant disappointment for Brother Roger (Spink 2005: 83-85; Chiron 2008: 189; Schutz 1971a). Later in his life, the founder of Taizé described John XXIII as an unrecognised prophet whose ministry for unity had been substantially rejected (Schutz 1971a: 149). In two later books, Roger Schutz remembers his last visit to John XXIII and his spiritual testament. In his view, the old Pope was convinced that Catholic ecumenism had to be reoriented in the direction of a pluralism consisting of many concentric circles. At a time when both Catholics and Protestants misunderstood the aim of Taizé's ecumenical actions, John XXIII demonstrated that he understood the Community's commitment to promote not a return to Catholicism but a patient work of reform and convergence among Christians (Schutz 1982a: 151; 2001: 101).

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<sup>23</sup> After the Council, Roger Schutz and Max Thurian wrote a commentary on this document. The French theologian Henri de Lubac wrote a foreword to their book (Schutz and Thurian 1966: 191).

<sup>24</sup> Roger Schutz attended the works of the CELAM conference of Puebla (1979), where he was invited to give an address to the assembly; he also participated in the debates during which the theme of the 'preferential option for the poor' was discussed (Schutz 1982a: 162; Chiron 2008: 315).

Roger Schutz's reflections on the outcome of the Council and on the future of ecumenism are developed in *Dynamique du provisoire* (Schutz and Taizé 1965), published on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Taizé and before the last session of the Council. In it Brother Roger expresses his fears about a possible paralysis of ecumenism and evokes the dangers of a peace that may simply assume as irreversible the current denominational status quo. In his view, a reform from both sides could progressively bring Churches closer and eventually lead to visible unity. In the same book, Roger Schutz raises an issue that was seen as extremely controversial in Protestant circles, concerning the authority and leadership of the Pope:

*Si l'Eglise réclame à la tête de chaque communauté un homme qui suscite l'unanimité, qui regroupe ce qui toujours se désagrège, ne doit-elle pas aussi accepter un pasteur des pasteurs et des communautés, pour les rassembler inlassablement?*<sup>25</sup> (Schutz and Taizé 1965: 16)

According to Chiron, the experience of the council contributed to making the Prior of Taizé more 'catholic' (Chiron 2008: 209). This statement should be understood in the sense that the experience of the Council concretely embodied for him a form of dynamic unity that profoundly impressed him. While Brother Roger's position on the leadership of the Pope as an agent of unity for a truly universal ('catholic') Church could seem ambiguous to many Protestants, it is important to remember that Taizé's view of ecumenism was rooted in the idea of a spiritual convergence (Schutz and Taizé 1965: 134; Schutz 1971b: 129-30; 1973: 154; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 161-62; Congar et al. 2002: 468). This process involved a progressive acceptance of denominational diversity and emphasised a form of unity founded on the rich complementarity of all Churches (Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 60; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 162; Schutz and Teresa 1977). Nevertheless, as recorded by Yves Congar in his journal of the Council, the years following this event made the Prior of Taizé deeply aware of the contradictions, divisions, and crises the *aggiornamento* had created within the Catholic Church (Schutz and Taizé 1965; Schutz 1973; Congar et al. 2002: 209). His book *Unanimité dans le pluralisme* (Schutz 1966) reflects his concern that the conflicts internal to Catholicism might bring ecumenism to a halt. In such a difficult transition, Brother Roger believed the Taizé Community could represent a prophetic sign of a new Pentecost that would soon bring the Church to unity. At a time when the number of young people visiting the Community was rapidly increasing, Brother Roger began to identify them as the possible catalyst for a springtime of the

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<sup>25</sup> Translation: 'If the Church demands at the head of each community a man who encourages unanimity, who gathers together those who always drift apart, should she not also accept a shepherd of the shepherds and of the various communities, who will work tirelessly to bring them together?' (Roger 1969: 45).

Church. The younger generations represented God's prophetic challenge for the Church, a stimulation to overcome conflicts and bring Christianity to the freshness of its early origins, and a missional bridge towards the contemporary world.

As I will show in the next section, Taizé's involvement in ministry to young people can be considered as a reaction to the ecumenical impasse following the Council. The theological themes incorporated by Taizé during the years of its early ecumenical activity became the framework within which the Community interpreted its ministry to youth. Parallel to this transition, the focus of Taizé's ecumenical commitment moves from the arena of institutional ecumenism to that of a broader form of spiritual and human reconciliation, seen as a precondition for any kind of dialogue. This evolution is well expressed by the words Cardinal Glemp pronounced in 1999 (Chiron 2008: 342; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 202):

*Le frère Roger représente un œcuménisme qui ne saurait être seulement celui d'un rapprochement, d'une unification quelque peu formelle des confessions divisées. La mission œcuménique de Frère Roger est bien plus profonde, elle a pour but de dévoiler la plénitude de Dieu à travers la plénitude de l'homme. Car c'est l'homme qui est éclaté et divisé. Si nous voulons atteindre un œcuménisme vrai, nous devons d'abord unifier l'homme, l'intégrer intérieurement.*<sup>26</sup>

## 1.5 Taizé and young people (1965 to present)

In one of his journals, Roger Schutz describes the transformation undergone by the Community during and immediately after the Council as a time in which Taizé had been 'thrown out on the public scene' in such a way that it took seven years, from 1962 to 1969, to fully realise the effects of media exposure on the Community and to re-elaborate its identity (Schutz 1970b: 122-23; 1971b: 29).

Gaulué (Galué 2002) attributes the progressive focusing of Taizé on youth ministry to a strategy oriented to revitalising ecumenical dialogue during the difficult years following the Council. This analysis, also confirmed by Grenier (Grenier 1975: 75) and Chiron (Chiron 2008: 212-13), is supported by Roger Schutz's own reflections on the genesis of the most important youth project organised by the Community between the end of the 1960s and the 1970s: the Youth Council (Schutz 1971b: 23).

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<sup>26</sup> Translation: 'Brother Roger represents a form of ecumenism that cannot be exhausted by any kind of formal rapprochement between divided denominations. His ecumenical mission is much deeper, as it aims at unveiling the fullness of God in the fullness of human beings. All human beings are in fact divided within themselves. If we want to achieve a real form of ecumenism, we need to bring unity within the individual first and build towards their inner integration'.

During the Second Vatican Council and in the years immediately after, Taizé experienced a significant growth in the number of its visitors, particularly among young people (Brico 1982: 25-26; Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 91-92; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 76-77). Part of this growth involved Catholics, who considered Taizé as a laboratory of the Council in the areas of liturgical renewal and ecumenism (Chiron 2008: 214-19).

Before the Vatican Council, Taizé organised separate youth summer camps for Catholics and Protestants; immediately after the Council, in 1966, the Community started organising joint summer events at Taizé, the 'International Youth Meetings'. Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, and ecumenical leaders were frequently invited to speak. The themes of these gatherings combined Christian spirituality and active commitment to religious and social reconciliation (Chiron 2008: 220). In an article published in the Catholic magazine *La Croix*, Roger Schutz explained the perspective underlying the Community's involvement in youth ministry. In his view, doctrinal ecumenism was leading ecumenical dialogue to a paralysis; the only prophetic way forward was to promote spiritual and practical forms of ecumenism. These would act as a propeller and bring about unity. In Brother Roger's words:

*L'œcuménisme actuel ne nous rend pas euphorique. Il faut se hâter si l'on veut qu'il intéresse encore une jeunesse qui, malgré ses préoccupations religieuses, est tentée d'abandonner les institutions religieuses pour s'occuper directement de l'homme aujourd'hui et qui, tout le moins, tient à l'égard des Eglises des jugements sévères et sans appel... La réconciliation des Eglises, nous la voulons pour aujourd'hui... Nous n'avons aucune illusion relativement à une unité amorcée par un résultat de tractations ou d'accords juridiques. Les textes viendront lorsqu'on aura constaté l'unité : ils ne précéderont pas cette unité [...] Nous nous heurtons toujours aux théologiens et aux chefs d'Eglise dont nous ne sommes pas capables de juger les raisonnements ; les clefs sont entre leurs mains et, en définitive, nous ne pouvons rien faire. Rien faire, sauf peut-être un coup d'éclat.<sup>27</sup> (Schutz 1966)*

This quote summarises well Roger Schutz's ecumenical perspective at the time: his judgement on the ecumenical impasse provoked by theologians and church leaders was extremely severe. His strong words represented well his frustration and the feeling of being totally powerless. Disappointed by the inconclusiveness of theologians and church leaders, he tried to break their paralysing monopoly by gradually turning to young people and grass roots spiritual ecumenism to realise an ecumenical 'coup'. Schutz's critique took root, on the one hand, in Monod's and Couturier's emphasis on a spiritual and practical form of ecumenism and, on the other hand, in

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<sup>27</sup> Translation: 'Contemporary ecumenism does not overjoy us. We need to act fast if we want to interest the younger generations. Despite their religious interest, youth are tempted to abandon church institutions to take concrete care of today's human beings. Young people's judgement concerning contemporary churches is severe and final... We want reconciliation now, in the present... We have no illusion that a unity built upon negotiations and legal agreement may actually work. Official statements will come when unity will become reality: they will not precede unity... Today we have to face theologians and church leaders whose reasoning we cannot judge: the keys are in their hands and finally we cannot do anything. Anything but – perhaps – a coup'.



the missional urgency of unity that Brother Roger had highlighted in his previous *Vivre l'aujourd'hui de Dieu* (Schutz 1959) and *L'unité, espérance de vie* (Schutz 1962a). These two elements—spiritual ecumenism and missional emphasis—became the axis of Taizé's progressive focusing on the importance for younger generations to see evidence of Christian institutions' credibility at a time of religious crisis. One way in which this spiritual and practical ecumenism was applied to produce a 'coup' was—and still is—the practice of intercommunion at Taizé (Chiron 2008: 222-23). While separately offering both the Catholic Eucharist and the Protestant Holy Supper, the Community has never prevented young people from freely participating in either of them.

To emphasise the ecumenical and practical character of its developing youth-oriented ministry, Roger Schutz invited young people in those years to create ecumenical 'brotherhoods' and to experience the spiritual sharing the Brothers of Taizé practiced as a Community<sup>28</sup> (Schutz 1971b: 66). Furthermore, the International Youth Meetings—joint camps involving Christians from all the main traditions—were repeated three times between 1966 and 1969. During these gatherings, the Community emphasised the necessity for Churches to set aside their theological differences and show concrete signs of courage by achieving spiritual and practical forms of unity.

During this transition, Roger Schutz reinterpreted his ecumenical emphasis in light of the historical and cultural context of the years immediately preceding and following 1968. His frequent contacts with young people made him acutely aware of the risk of a generational crisis. His answer to the events taking place in France and in different parts of the world in 1968 is contained in the book *Violence des pacifiques* (Roger 1968), the first explicitly addressed to young people. In this book Roger Schutz reformulates the core themes at the centre of Taizé's identity: commitment to mission, particularly towards the poor and the weak, emphasis on personal spirituality, and a concept of ecumenism now broadly interpreted as human reconciliation. In Brother Roger's perspective students' reciprocal solidarity in fighting the institutions of an oppressive society and the Church's sectarian divisions constitutes a paradoxical prophetic challenge. The tumultuous events of 1968 are interpreted as a pressing invitation for Christians to react and overcome their paralysis. The book is a testimony of

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<sup>28</sup> According to Chiron, between 1966 and 1967 young people created eighty brotherhoods in different parts of the world, some of them adopting forms of communal life (Chiron 2008: 193) These groups were officially dismissed in 1969 as they had developed an orientation dominated by political and social concerns (Schutz 1971b: 99).

Brother Roger's broadening ecumenical horizon as beyond religious reform; it also promotes political and social change. Furthermore, it includes a consideration of the struggles young Christians had to face in their fight for social justice in Latin America. His answer to young people's aspirations echoes Martin Luther King's non-violent approach: peace is inconceivable without justice, but Christians are called to be 'violent for Christ'. There is a third way between passive pietism and violence, and this consists in a form of 'creative, prophetic violence'. This 'violence of the peaceful' strongly rejects the indifferent attitude of many Christians who feel at ease in their comfortable world. Schutz's approach is admittedly anti-ideological: his idea of prophetic violence is rooted in the Beatitudes and in the practice of a spirituality nurtured by the intimacy with the resurrected Christ (Roger 1968).

The publication of *Violence des pacifiques* also represents the beginning of a specific form of dialogue between Roger Schutz and young people. In this and in his following books, the Prior of Taizé adopts a characteristic style in which thoughts and anecdotes from his personal journals coagulate around a loose thematic idea, following personal associations or themes periodically promoted by the Community, sometimes without a clear chronological organisation. The tone is informal and dialogical and represents well the approach adopted by Brother Roger in his ministry, in which he tried to create a personal, intimate spiritual connection with young people (Chenu 2002: 11-26; Chiron 2008: 235, 42, 353, 61, 65; Roger 1968; Schutz 1976, 1973). This tone is part of a more general effort to shape a new language and adapt to a changing audience. Roger Schutz had, in fact, become increasingly aware of an ongoing shift in the Community's target audience. Compared with the 1940s and the 1950s, during which the Community's audience consisted mostly of church leaders and practicing believers, in the second half of the 1960s it became more generationally oriented and diverse in terms of cultural and social background, as well as in its level of religious commitment. Roger Schutz thus explained that transition and the difficulty of finding a common language and vision:

*Il n'y a pas de langage commun à tous : donc peu de chance d'approfondir une question quelconque tous ensemble. Chaque fois que quelqu'un parle, à supposer qu'il le fasse de façon cohérente, ce qui est rare, il n'est compris que d'une fraction jugée trop intellectuelle ou superficielle par les uns ou par les autres.<sup>29</sup> (Roger 1968) Les uns sont agnostiques, d'autres en pleine recherche, d'autres traversent le feu et sont sortis affermis, d'autres encore ont une certitude de Dieu qui nous entraîne.<sup>30</sup> (Croix)*

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<sup>29</sup> Translation: 'There is no common language, so it is very difficult to go deep in a discussion together. Every time someone speaks, provided they can express themselves in any coherent fashion (which is rare), what the person says is understood only by a fraction of the audience, which some will judge as too intellectual and others as too superficial'.

<sup>30</sup> Translation: 'Some are agnostic, some are searching, and others are so sure about God that they stimulate us too'.

These developments required adjustments at different levels. The first concerned the structure of the youth meetings. Their organisation began to be based on small groups, a context where adapting to each other's language was easier and possible issues could be limited (Roger 1968). The second adjustment took place at the level of language and contents, which were simplified through a frequent appeal to emotions, symbols, and images (Chiron 2008: 242; Croix). The third area of adaptation was communal worship, as it was with the goal of reaching youth's needs that Taizé progressively elaborated its current liturgical style.<sup>31</sup>

The climax of this period of intense changes for the Community was marked by the organisation of the Youth Council. Brother Roger announced the initiative during Easter of 1970 and defined it as a 'demanding' meeting, organised to 'comfort the discouraged and strengthen the committed'. The idea of a 'coup' to break the ecumenical impasse, revitalise young people's trust in the Church, and stop their exodus from congregations was at the centre of Brother Roger's agenda for this event (Schutz 1971b: 61-62). In his view, the Council represented the possibility of a 'springtime' of revival and reform for the Church, which he wanted to give up its power and be open to sharing, as a visible place of communion for humankind (Schutz 1970a: 3). According to Manificat, the tones used by Roger Schutz and his choice of the word 'Council' for this initiative implicitly suggested a critique of the outcome of the Second Vatican Council (Manificat 1976: 365). Manificat's view is confirmed, in my view, by Brother Roger's repeated mentions of a 'betrayal' of John XXIII's prophetic mandate and of the Vatican Council's original mission.

The Youth Council was prepared by four years of mobilisation (1970-1974). Roger Schutz's following books, *Ta fête soit sans fin* (Schutz 1971b), *Lutte et contemplation* (Schutz 1973) and *Vivre l'inespéré* (Schutz 1976) are conceived as a journal of this preparation. During this time, young people were encouraged to work as local teams and become agents of hope by promoting concrete actions of reconciliation. The newsletter *Aujourd'hui*, created during the Vatican Council, was replaced by the quarterly *Lettre de Taizé*. This periodical aimed at providing a basic form of connection between Taizé and the local teams working in different

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<sup>31</sup> Until that time, the language used during Taizé's liturgies had been French. In 1961 the *Office de l'Eglise universelle*, which Taizé had adopted under the influence of *Eglise et Liturgie*, was replaced by the *Office de Taizé*. This was essentially a Book of Hours re-elaborated from a contemporary perspective. The liturgy included four foundational elements: Bible reading, psalmody, corporate prayer, and penitential prayer. However, the growing linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity of Taizé's young pilgrims led the Community—not without resistance—to progressively modify its liturgical model. This kept its foundational elements, but it was simplified and gave an increasing space to singing and silence as ways to create a sense of unity and reach young people from different backgrounds. See (1963; Chiron 2008: 283-84; Kubicki 1999).

parts of the world (Chiron 2008: 253). In the difficult years after 1968, Roger Schutz described Taizé's developing relationship with young people with the following words:

*Avant tout être pour eux des hommes d'écoute, jamais des maîtres spirituels. Qui s'érigerait en maître pourrait bien entrer dans cette prétention spirituelle qui est la mort de l'âme... leur répondre par des conseils ou par des catégories 'il faut' mènerait sur des chemins de traverse. Les écouter pour déblayer le terrain et préparer en eux les chemins du Christ.*<sup>32</sup> (Schutz 1982a: 18-19)

Listening and removing obstacles, opening and preparing the way for Christ's action: what Brother Roger outlined and elaborated between the end of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s was a non-directive, maieutic approach to the ministry with young people. This remains the foundation of the Community's relationship with the younger generations, as highlighted by Danièle Hervieu-Léger's analyses of contemporary pilgrimages to Taizé (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 99-109).

The Youth Council took place on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 1974 and was attended by about 40,000 young people from different parts of the world. It lasted four days, during which young people had workshop sessions in groups and four communal celebrations including songs, prayers, and testimonies from young people.<sup>33</sup> Among the church leaders invited to participate, there were five cardinals (among them Cardinal Willebrands, who read a message from Paul VI), the president of the World Council of Churches, Philip Potter, and bishops from many countries.<sup>34</sup> The structure of the gathering was based mostly on small groups and did not offer young people the possibility of interacting with church leaders, a choice strongly criticised by Grenier as motivated by fear (Grenier 1975: 161-81). According to Grenier, this strategy was among the causes of the Youth Council's vague outcome,<sup>35</sup> which is almost unanimously recognised by

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<sup>32</sup> Translation: 'Above all it is important to be listeners, never spiritual masters. Those who elevate themselves to the level of masters could develop that spiritual pride which is the death of the soul... to answer by trying to give advice or by using expressions such as "you must" would lead nowhere. What is important is listening to them to clear the ground and open an inner way to Christ'.

<sup>33</sup> Roger Schutz did not consider the meeting as fully successful and expressed concern for the difficulty the Community experienced in creating a prayerful atmosphere among such a big and diverse group of people. This realisation and the increasingly international character of the meetings triggered a process of progressive liturgical adjustments. This involved simplifying the Community's liturgical language and prioritising young people's involvement and participation. According to Brother Roger's testimony, this evolution did not represent an easy transition for the Community, as it initially challenged the quality of its communal worship (Brico 1982: 117).

<sup>34</sup> An extended coverage of the event was ensured by one of the most respected French journalists of the time, Hubert Beuve-Méry, founder of the prestigious newspaper *Le Monde*. In 1974 Beuve-Méry coordinated the publication of a book-long account of the event, which included youth testimonies (Beuve-Méry 1975).

<sup>35</sup> Grenier's research is based on the study of contemporary documents published by the Community. In his view, the Youth Council revealed a dichotomy between Brother Roger's language and concerns—predominantly religious, ecumenical and Church-centred—and the aspirations expressed by young people. Schutz's language mostly emphasised transcendent concerns; social justice themes tended to remain in the background and were expressed in general, abstract terms. On the contrary, in young people's letters religious and ecumenical concerns played a marginal role, while their dominant interest focused on concrete actions to improve society. Furthermore, young people's basic language was that of political commitment and social activism. A general sensibility to Christian themes related to the issue of justice remained in the background, but the Church and its future did not seem to constitute young people's main concern. In Grenier's opinion, this divergence of focus could be one of the reasons behind Taizé's choice to avoid direct communications between church leaders and young people, and the main root of the

historians of the Community (Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 91-121; Grenier 1975: 125-46; Brico 1982: 27-45; Spink 2005: 91-97). According to them, Roger Schutz feared a possible conversion of young people's mobilisation into a 'Taizé movement' (Brico 1982: 58; Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 105-21; Grenier 1975: 125-46). For a few years after the initial event, the Youth Council continued to exist as a series of local forums (Brico 1982: 38-45; Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 115-21). To prevent the possible birth of an organised youth movement, in 1979 Brother Roger decided to indefinitely suspend the Council (Brico 1982: 53; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 120). In an interview released to Rex Brico, a few years later, Roger Schutz explained his motivations:

*En supprimant les petites cellules qui s'étaient créées et qui portaient le nom de Taizé comme étiquette, en évitant tout ce qui pourrait faire apparaître le concile des jeunes comme un mouvement, nous avons essayé de nous rappeler les uns les autres que Taizé était uniquement une petite communauté. Ce qui peut être engendré à partir de cette communauté n'existe que pour être offert à la communion universelle des chrétiens. Une communauté comme la notre est appelée avant tout à être un levain dans la pâte de l'Eglise et de l'humanité [...] En 1979, face à l'accroissement du nombre des jeunes, il a été nécessaire de suspendre pour un temps le concile des jeunes, pour ne pas en faire un mouvement de plus.<sup>36</sup> (Brico 1982: 117)*

Sceptical of ideological and abstract turns (Brico 1982: 118-19; Schutz 1973; 1976: 156), in the early 1980s Roger Schutz decided to attenuate the Youth Council's initial impulse toward collective mobilisation and to reorient its goals. In 1982 he launched a Worldwide Pilgrimage of Reconciliation, an initiative officially renamed Pilgrimage of Trust on Earth in 1985. This programme still continues today. It emphasises two themes: the necessity of undertaking a personal inner pilgrimage leading to spiritual conversion, and the commitment to revitalise local churches through concrete actions of reconciliation (Spink 1986a: 97-102, 19-22, 33-41; Gonzalez-Balado 2003: 66-104). Despite all their weaknesses, Brother Roger considered local churches as places of continuity, where young people's activism could represent a concrete sign of hope (Brico 1982: 116). The suspension of the Youth Council and the launching of a symbolic Pilgrimage of Trust marks Brother Roger's shift towards a gradual spiritualisation and privatisation of his original vision of a 'coup' aimed at bringing about visible ecumenical unity. The Youth Council had failed to produce any significant impact on the Church. Faced with

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Youth Council's failure (Grenier 1975: 75). The following decision to dismantle the local teams to avoid the birth of a movement could confirm Grenier's assessment (Brico 1982: 117).

<sup>36</sup> Translation: 'By suppressing the small cell groups that had formed and used the name of Taizé to identify themselves, by avoiding any appearance of a movement originating from the Youth Council, we tried to remind ourselves that Taizé is only a small community. Whatever is created from this small community will only exist to be offered to the universal communion of all Christians. A community like ours is first of all called to be yeast in the dough of the Church and of humankind [...] In 1979, faced with increasing numbers of young visitors, we had to temporarily suspend the Youth Council to avoid turning it into one more movement'.

insurmountable obstacles it was now necessary to think about an inner way to realise ecumenical reconciliation. This development emerges in *Etonnement d'un amour* (Schutz 1979) and in the following *Fleurissent les déserts* (Schutz 1982a), where the theme of visible ecumenical unity is progressively marginalised and replaced by a broader emphasis on spiritual brotherhood and solidarity. Young people continue to be seen as the hope of renewal, the agents and forerunners of Roger Schutz's vision of ecumenical unity.

The Youth Council can be considered as a laboratory of the transformations that shaped Taizé's current identity. This involved three processes: an intentional adaptation of Taizé's liturgy to its growing youth audience, the creation of a specific, recognisable image, and an increasing internationalisation of Taizé.

In the area of liturgy, growing flows of young people from many ethnic backgrounds and levels of religious involvement made the Community aware of the necessity to simplify its expressions (Chiron 2008: 283-84; Brico 1982: 117). This task was entrusted to liturgist and musician Jacques Berthier, who had already worked for the Community in the past. Berthier authored many of the now internationally known Taizé songs. He closely cooperated with Brother Robert, a member of the Community who wrote the lyrics. The new songs were conceived as forms of participative prayer and meditation. The basic music structures were the *canon* and the *ostinato* (short musical 'phrases' repeated several times); solo singing interacted with the choral parts to add movement and diversity to the song. According to Brother Émile (Chenu 2002: 33-34), this music form was particularly appropriate for the context because it made possible to overcome language barriers. Written in multiple languages, the songs were based on short, simple phrases young people could quickly learn through repetition. This way of singing was designed to encourage participation and model diversity and inclusiveness. Beyond these features the music was also intentionally conceived as meditative. Sung prayer was not intended to create excitement but to structure a space that could host young people's search for God, even when used outside of the Community's context. The repetition of simple phrases was designed to invite young people to interiorise the text, free their intellect, and ultimately lead them to discover the inner faith already present in their hearts (Schutz 2001: 21-24, 35-40). Singing was also conceived as a form of contextual response to young people's anxieties in a disorienting society, where personal spaces of reflection and spiritual rest became increasingly difficult to find. In this perspective, the beauty of music and its intentional meditative qualities allowed young people to rediscover the inner experience of prayer (Chenu 2002: 33-34). According to

Kubicki, the Community's liturgy and music constitute a powerful media of its ecumenical theology and mission. They are designed to shape a sense of community and promote participation; singing represents an embodied enactment of a normative way of relating to the others and invites young people to find their identity and place as a part of a universally welcoming community. In fact, youth's involvement in making music has a performative function: it allows young people to tangibly experience and enact unity. Liturgical participation represents a form of symbolic anticipation of the Community's vision of universal reconciliation. The ongoing ritual performance of acts mediating unity *'does something'* as it involves a *'disciplined rehearsal'* of right attitudes (Kubicki 1999: 186).

According to Chiron, it is in this same period and due to Mother Teresa's influence<sup>37</sup> that Roger Schutz began adopting a visual language intended to identify Taizé (Chiron 2008: 293). The first elements were introduced when, like Mother Teresa, Roger Schutz decided to wear a white robe as his usual dress (previously, like the other members of the Community, he wore a white tunic only during the prayers at Taizé or in special circumstances) and adopted the sign of the cross as a form of blessing. This 'branding' process continued with the creation of the Taizé cross (a combination between a standard cross and a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit) and the introduction of its iconic orange sails as a background for the apse of the Church of the Reconciliation.

The Youth Council years also accelerated the progressive globalisation of Taizé. The Community extended its network well beyond Europe; at the same time, the group of Brothers became increasingly multicultural and included members from different continents. These changes required a rethinking of Taizé's understanding of its mission (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 121). Should Taizé send Brothers abroad and create new communities in different parts of the world? How could Taizé truly create communion among young people coming from so many different parts of the world? Together with the creation of provisional cells of Brothers in various continents (a practice already part of the Community's tradition), the answer consisted in organising international youth teams that were sent to find signs of hope in difficult local realities (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 122). At the same time, the Community intensified its presence outside Taizé. Starting from the end of 1974, many youth gatherings were organised

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<sup>37</sup> Mother Teresa was invited to visit Taizé during Easter week of 1976, as part of the preparation leading to Roger Schutz's end-year travel to Calcutta. Together, they wrote three books of meditations and prayers (Schutz and Teresa 1986, 1987, 1992).

in different parts of the world: Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, United States, Canada, and several countries of Africa and Asia. The aim was to nurture hope and gather those who were not able to attend the meetings in Taizé. This activity was particularly intense in Latin America, with which the Community had developed strong connections since the Second Vatican Council. These regional gatherings were also laboratories in which the current structure of Taizé's international meetings was elaborated. To support their organisation, the Community encouraged local parishes and families to open their doors and host young people from different parts of the world, as signs of hope and reconciliation. The first of these events took place in Guadalajara (1974), where Mexican families were invited to welcome young people coming from the United States and Canada. The goal was 'to discover in human faces a reflex of God's face' and find 'places of hope'<sup>38</sup> (Chiron 2008: 287-89; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 123-25).

In 1976 Roger Schutz spent the final weeks of the year in Calcutta (Schutz 1982a: 9). By this new symbolic action he wanted to inaugurate a spiritual pilgrimage to the poorest cities of the Southern hemisphere. His aim was to 'be with' the invisible and the marginalised, create opportunities for dialogue, and incarnate the commitment to justice and reconciliation shared with young people at the end of the Youth Council.<sup>39</sup> Each year, concurrent with these visits, the Prior wrote a letter to be read during the international youth meetings organised by Taizé in different cities of Europe. This reading allowed him to create a symbolic connection between poor and affluent youth in different parts of the world. During the year, the letter was also distributed to all those who visited Taizé (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 120). This practice continues to this day with Brother Alois, Roger Schutz's successor. Through the years, Roger Schutz's letters show a remarkable continuity of themes. They express a specific pedagogy based on very simple key formulas, frequently repeated, emphasising the necessity of integrating personal spirituality and commitment against poverty and suffering, as being Christians implies becoming signs of God's eternity (Schutz 1984).

However symbolic actions and spiritual presence among the poor were not sufficient. The Community wanted to add continuity to its ministry by concretely interacting with the contexts

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<sup>38</sup> An example of this orientation was Roger Schutz's visit to Chile in 1975, immediately after his travel to Mexico. This pilgrimage had a symbolic meaning, as by his presence Schutz wanted to express solidarity with the people of that country, oppressed by Pinochet's dictatorship. To emphasise his protest, Schutz refused to meet Pinochet, despite the fact that the appointment had already been scheduled as part of the programme for his visit (Schutz 1979: 44-48)

<sup>39</sup> In the final document, elaborated by a team of young people from different continents, the Youth Council sent a Letter to the People of God addressed to all Christians. The Church was invited to give up all forms of power and compromises with the powerful in order to be the seed of a society without classes and oppression. In the final statement, young people committed themselves to give up privileges and offer their lives as a gift (Taizé 1974).



where young pilgrims lived their everyday lives. To reach this goal, in 1978 Taizé launched the European Youth Meetings, which were organised at the end of each year in a city on the continent. The first took place in Paris and gathered 15,000 young people, but across the years these meetings were attended by up to 100,000 participants in 1992 (Vienna) and 1994 (Paris) (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 149; Chiron 2008: 293). The aim of these events was—and still is—to create a continuity of action and connection with the parishes of the host city. Each year they involve local congregations in hosting thousands of young people from many different countries, thus creating opportunities of ecumenical dialogue and spiritual sharing. In the Community's vision, in fact, parishes' involvement should contribute to their revitalisation (Schutz 1979). According to Escaffit, these events played a key role in increasing Taizé's visibility at an international level (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 148). Furthermore, they contributed to the development and international spreading of Taizé's music and liturgical style (Santos 2008: 147-66).

During the 1980s, Taizé intensified its connections with Eastern Europe and, above all, Poland. Roger Schutz started entertaining contacts with this country when he first met Cardinal Wojtyla during the Second Vatican Council. Brother Roger and other Community members repeatedly visited Poland, Eastern Germany, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the former USSR, often in very difficult conditions (Schutz 2005: 96, 99-100; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 133-34; Chenu 2002: 117; Taizé 2006: 106-07). These visits aimed at creating and maintaining a network of connections to offer support to the Christian groups of those countries. The 1980s were also marked by the cooperation between John Paul II and Roger Schutz in the organisation of the Youth Jubilee (1984). Two years later, the Pope invited the founder of Taizé to participate in the first World Youth Day<sup>40</sup> (Chiron 2008: 334-36).

The years between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were characterised by a rapid increase in the presence of Eastern European young people at Taizé and during its European meetings. This wave completely transformed the life of the Community. Young people's attendance at Taizé doubled almost overnight, according to the testimony of the

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<sup>40</sup> French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Leger argues for a strong derivative relationship between Taizé's European Youth Meetings and the Catholic World Youth Day (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 99-109). Escaffit and Rasiwala highlight a similar connection (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 152). However Chiron argues that the roots of the World Youth Day can primarily be found in a model created by a Polish youth movement with which John Paul II had been in contact when he served as cardinal in Krakow. Differently from Taizé's European Youth Meetings, the World Youth Day has strong institutional connotations: it is built around a prayer vigil with the Pope and a Sunday mass; while it is open to non-practicing young people, it is primarily oriented to encourage identification with the Catholic Church by providing visibility for its leaders and structures and by promoting the active involvement of its local parishes (Chiron 2008: 335-36).

Brothers<sup>41</sup> (Chiron 2008: 334-36; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 136-40). In Escaffit's view this increase in attendance was the result of the connections Taizé had developed with Eastern European church leaders, starting from the Second Vatican Council. During the mid-1960s,<sup>42</sup> in fact, the Community created an underground network that reached many Christians living in Communist countries (Chenu 2002: 115-38; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 136-40). In 1987 Taizé organised its first European Youth Meeting in a Communist country, Ljubljana (Slovenia, former Yugoslavia). The 1988 European Youth Meeting in Paris was the first to see a massive attendance from Eastern Europe,<sup>43</sup> particularly from Yugoslavia, Poland, and Hungary. The following April (1989) a special 'East-West' meeting was organised in Pecs, Hungary. The Berlin Wall was about to fall, and 20,000 young people from countries of the Communist block attended the event. The first European Youth Meeting organised after the fall of the Berlin Wall took place in Wroclaw (Poland) at the end of 1989. It was attended by 50,000 young people, which included for the first time a significant number of young people from the USSR. Immediately after the meeting and with remarkable readiness, Roger Schutz went to Romania (Chiron 2008: 348-50; Schutz 2005: 141), where Ceausescu's regime had just collapsed, to be with young people and support a reconciliation process in that country (Schutz 2005: 141-42).

## 1.6 Conclusion: Taizé today

In 1990 Taizé celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. During the last two decades, Roger Schutz had become an internationally recognised personality (Chenu 2002: 237-42; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 146-47). The Community had connections with important religious and political leaders in many parts of the world<sup>44</sup> and had become a universal symbol of peace, reconciliation, and commitment to justice. To celebrate the anniversary of the Community's birth, the French newspaper *Le Monde* published a special issue on Taizé. In an interview with journalist Henri

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<sup>41</sup> This increased attendance involved significant changes also at a structural level. The Church of Reconciliation had to be enlarged and the new section was equipped with a system of room dividers, still in place. The three domes surmounting the church, in the Orthodox style, were also built during these years to give Eastern European pilgrims a feeling of 'home'. Furthermore, at the beginning of the 1980s Taizé started incorporating Orthodox elements in its music and liturgy. The most important innovation was the introduction of the prayer around a Russian icon of the cross, each Friday evening. During those years the Community also started organising regular Orthodox liturgies, which took place two or three times a week during the summer (Chiron 2008: 350; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 141).

<sup>42</sup> According to Escaffit and Rasiwala, this work was stimulated by the personal commitment of two German members of the Taizé Community, Brother Cristophe and Brother Rudolph (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 138).

<sup>43</sup> About 8,500 out of the overall 30,000 participants (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 135).

<sup>44</sup> The long relationship between Taizé and Eastern Europe created strong connections between the Community and various political leaders of those countries (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 142-43; Chenu 2002: 115-27). Among them it was possible to find Vaclav Havel (Czech Republic), Tadeusz Mazowiecki (Poland), Lojze Peterle (Slovenia), Pal Solt (Hungary).

Tincq, Brother Roger confessed his genuine amazement for '*une aventure spirituelle qui a pris des dimensions que nous n'avions jamais soupçonnées*'<sup>45</sup> (Tincq 1990; Chiron 2008: 351).

The celebration took place at a time of rapid changes for the Community, due to the recent wave of young, Eastern European pilgrims (Santos 2008: 72-78; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 171-207). The mid and late 1990s were a time of slow stabilisation for Taizé. In its characteristic interplay of continuity with tradition and small, ongoing adaptations, the Community progressively adjusted to the needs of its new audience (Schutz and Taizé 1965; Santos 2008: 54). With Brother Roger's progressive aging, his ability to fulfil his commitments declined.<sup>46</sup> His sight weakened and he became less able to travel and walk. His decline was reflected in a slowing down of the Community's dynamism. This process became particularly obvious in the last decade of his life, between the late 1990s and 2005, the year of his death (Santos 2008: 76-77). In 1998 Brother Roger publicly designated his successor in the person of a Catholic member of the Community, Brother Alois. Alois Löser joined the Taizé Community in 1974, at the age of 20. It was the year of the Youth Council. He took his lifelong vows as a Brother after a four-year preparation, in 1978. In the same year he was secretly chosen by the Prior of Taizé as his successor and started training for this task (Chiron 2008: 367-68; Spink 2005: 198; Santos 2008: 77; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 183). In January 2005 Brother Roger announced his gradual retirement and Brother Alois' formal taking over as Prior of the Community (Santos 2008: 77). Only a few months later, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2005, Brother Roger was brutally murdered by a mentally ill Romanian woman while he was attending a prayer service in the Church of Reconciliation, together with about 2,500 young people (Santos 2008: 75; Spink 2005: 197; Chiron 2008: 366-70). He was ninety years old. In the following days, 15,000 people travelled to attend Brother Roger's funeral, during which Brother Alois pronounced a moving appeal for forgiveness and compassion towards the woman who had committed the crime. A significant number of leaders representing the Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican

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<sup>45</sup> Translation: '*a spiritual adventure that had taken unexpected proportions*'.

<sup>46</sup> Brother Roger's aging was also accompanied by a decrease in his writing activity. Besides his cooperation with Mother Teresa (1986-1992), in these decades he only authored four works, which include an anthology of his previous writings, *Son amour est un feu* (Schutz 1988b) and a collection of daily devotionals, *En tout la paix du cœur* (Schutz 1995). *Dieu ne peut qu'aimer* (Schutz 2001) and *Pressens-tu un bonheur?* (Schutz 2005) are the two last books he published; both largely draw from previous works. In terms of content, they complete the trajectory initiated by *Etonnement d'un amour* (Schutz 1982a) and *Fleurissent les déserts* (Schutz 1982a), which involved a progressive spiritualisation and privatisation of Brother Roger's ecumenical vision. In fact, both *Dieu ne peut qu'aimer* (Schutz 2001) and *Pressens-tu un bonheur?* (Schutz 2005) are dominated by a tendency to privatise ecumenical reconciliation, whose realisation primarily involves the spiritual and relational sphere of each single individual. Communion is the outcome of an individual's journey of spiritual transformation that leads from struggle and doubt to embracing Christ's faithful presence within us, to finally result in a personal commitment to live generously in the world.

traditions and the most important ecumenical institutions, alongside many political personalities, attended the ceremony (Spink 2005: 197-98; Santos 2008: 75; Chiron 2008: 366-70). According to Santos' testimony, the following week was surprisingly peaceful and 'normal' (Santos 2008: 76). Activities continued according to the usual schedule. Brother Alois quietly led the Community through this transition, sitting in the Church of Reconciliation during prayers, surrounded by children like his predecessor, at his same place.

Today, the activities and meetings associated with the Pilgrimage of Trust still continue to mobilise the Community's efforts around the world (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 200). At the same time, starting from 2006, Taizé launched a new series of meetings held every year on a different continent, thus extending the tradition of the European youth gatherings to a global context (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 216). Escaffit emphasises how the Community's newfound dynamism symbolically represents a fulfilment of Brother Roger's last recorded word, '*Elargir...*' ('*To broaden...*'), which summarised the essence of Taizé's calling (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 204).

The blend of tradition and small adjustments that characterises life at Taizé implies that, over the years, little seems to change at the Community. Today, Taizé welcomes the children and grandchildren of its first young pilgrims (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 171); many of the young people who visited Taizé in previous decades have never interrupted their relationship with it and have become the leaders of today's youth groups (Casti 2009, 2010). This uninterrupted success has stimulated great interest among those—clergy, school and university chaplains, and youth ministry specialists—who directly experience the effects of a generalised decrease in young people's church attendance. For many Taizé represents a model, a resource that supports churches, parishes, and chaplaincies in their work with youth.<sup>47</sup> It encourages young people in their spiritual quest and sends them back refreshed to their original ecclesial contexts (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 157). Today, representatives of the Taizé Community are invited as experts to explain their vision of ministry with youth to large audiences of clergy and academics (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 172; Brother John 2006; Roger 1986: 16-17). However, over the decades and increasingly in recent times, research has complexified the picture of the

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<sup>47</sup> An expression of this development is the work of Princeton student Jason Santos (Santos 2008). His book is intended to introduce Taizé's spirituality and liturgy to the many who, having never visited the Community and often knowing very little about its history and theology, organise Taizé-style liturgies or use its songs. Santos worked in close cooperation with Taizé's Brothers and his work constitutes an interesting, although rather uncritical, source of information about the Community's ministry and practice.

Community's relationship with the younger generations, which a dominant narrative had simply represented as a surprising and mysterious supernatural gift.

Grenier's journalistic project, which I mentioned above, challenged this narrative with the first independent analysis of young people's motivations in visiting Taizé (Grenier 1975). His research on young people's involvement in the preparation of the Youth Council highlighted a significant gap between their aspirations and Brother Roger's attempts at channelling their energies into the ecumenical cause. Grenier's analysis finds a partial confirmation in Brother Roger's own awareness of a fundamental divergence between the concerns of a generation increasingly indifferent to institutional religion and his ecumenical focus on unity (Schutz 1983a: 48). In her review of Grenier's book, French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger lamented the scarcity of independent research on Taizé and expressed her appreciation for the work of a researcher who had not been '*séduit*' ('seduced') by the Community.<sup>48</sup> While, in her view, Grenier's study could not be categorised as sociological, its greatest merit consisted in shifting the focus of research from an institutional perspective, dominant in previous accounts, to young people's subjective experiences. Grenier's analysis highlighted the power dynamics at play in the relationship between the Community and youth as well as the sociological dynamics underlying Taizé's popularity among the younger generations. More generally, in Hervieu-Léger's perspective, Grenier was the first to challenge the simplistic narrative according to which '*les jeunes se rassembleraient sur cette colline bourguignonne [...] à l'appel conjugué de l'Esprit Saint et de frère Roger*'<sup>49</sup> (Hervieu-Léger 1977). The specific value of Grenier's work consisted in its unveiling some of the very concrete dynamics behind the organisation of the Youth Council, as well as the complex relationship between the Community's utopian dream and young people's aspirations (Hervieu-Léger 1977: 259-60).

Ross' research further explored the theological aspects of the gap between Taizé's mediation and young people's interpretations by investigating their appropriation of the Community's representation of the Gospel narratives and Christian doctrine (Ross 1987). The study highlighted both convergences and divergences between the Community's and young people's

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<sup>48</sup> In her review Hervieu-Léger acknowledged the difficulties researchers had to face in their investigations of a Community '*qui veille jalousement sur ses archives (ou sur ce qui en reste, puisqu'elle affirme les brûler), mesure soigneusement l'information diffuse à l'extérieur et contrôle autant qu'elle peut les commentaires*' (Hervieu-Léger 1977). Translation: '*Which strictly limits access to its archives (or better, to what is left of them, as they say they burn them), carefully measures the information it provides to external audiences, and makes every effort to keep control on what is written about itself*'.

<sup>49</sup> Translation: '*Young people would gather on this Burgundy hill [...] to the combined appeal of the Holy Spirit and of Brother Roger*'.

respective interpretations. Ross also investigated the influence of Taizé's liturgy on its audience and its appropriation by young people in their home parishes. Her conclusions showed that Taizé revitalised sacraments and ritual symbols Protestant Churches had often left aside. Furthermore, Ross' research argued that while in its translation of Christian doctrines the Community privileged a transcendent, otherworldly language, young pilgrims often interpreted Christian symbols and narratives via this-world-oriented metaphors. Ross' findings are significant in light of the research question of this thesis, as they support the idea of a substantial disconnection between the theological meanings mediated by the Community and young people's interpretations.

In more recent times, French sociologist Jean Werckmeister investigated the dynamics underlying youth pilgrimages to Taizé (Werckmeister 1993). His findings further complexified the narrative already challenged by Grenier and Hervieu-Léger (Grenier 1975; Hervieu-Léger 1977) concerning the motivations leading young people to visit the Community. His study analysed youth-oriented texts published by the Community, parish records concerning the organisation of youth trips to a Taizé European Youth Meeting (Prague 1990), and fifteen qualitative interviews with young people involved in a forthcoming parish-organised trip to this gathering. A first finding emerging from the study concerned participants' age, mostly falling in the range of 18 to 24 years, with a dramatic decrease of attendance starting from the age of 25. Werckmeister attributed this age distribution to parents' willingness to allow their younger children to experience forms of safe, group-based and Church-led vacation apart from their families, an option no longer required for older and more autonomous young people. In their interviews with Werckmeister, youth provided a broad range of reasons for their participation in the trip. These included a mix of religious aspirations (exchanging with Christian young people of the same age; finding a fresh start for their spiritual life; Brother Roger's personal aura of sanctity), social expectations (meeting new friends from other countries; sharing an exciting experience with a group of fellow young travellers), a generic sensibility for themes of social justice and, above all, an interest for a spiritual centre characterised by an ethos of reciprocal respect, listening, and high tolerance of diversity. Furthermore, Werckmeister's documentary analysis of Taizé texts highlighted some important characteristics of its communication with young people. The first was represented by Brother Roger's adoption of a *generational language*, a finding my thesis will also confirm (Chapter Three). Youth was targeted as a specific group whose contribution to the world's future was considered as uniquely important. In

Roger Schutz's thought, young people were seen as a value per se and positively identified with ideas such as purity, idealism, and a better future. According to Werckmeister, the frequent association between this language and the idea of a substantial failure of the previous generations further reinforced this rhetoric. Adults were portrayed as substantially indifferent or unable to solve evils such as wars, ecological problems, and economic exploitation. This generational language aimed at involving young people in a mission of renewal that could be interpreted in religious terms but also as a more general, humanistic calling to universal reconciliation. Werckmeister connected the permeability of the Community's message to plural and sometimes divergent interpretations with the fact that its expressions rarely provided any specific solution for contemporary evils, apart from a generic invitation to work for peace and reconciliation. In his view, the absence of any clear request of commitment constituted a key element in explaining the popularity of Taizé's message. This low level of expectations was further evidenced by the fact that, despite its generational focus, the Community avoided dealing with youth-related issues (development and maturity, sexual ethics, youth culture, career choices, unemployment, to mention only a few examples).

Hervieu-Léger's study expanded Werckmeister's sociological research by framing the analysis of youth pilgrimages to Taizé within the complex landscape of contemporary European religious transformations.<sup>50</sup> Her volume *'Le pèlerin et le converti: la religion en mouvement'* (Hervieu-Léger 1999) identifies Taizé as a typical example of a form of religiosity she defines as *'pelerine'* (*'pilgrim'*). Her research particularly focuses on young people's subjective experiences at the Community and is based on extensive observation and interviewing. Similarly to Werckmeister (Werckmeister 1993), Hervieu-Léger argues that at Taizé community is made possible by an environment characterised by an emphasis on few broad principles, low expectations, and high tolerance for diversity. The Community's language thus represents an extraordinary blend of universal and individual-centred emphasis. Mutual acceptance and acknowledgement of the value of every individual's spiritual quest constitute the normative ethos of Taizé. This is complemented by emotionally driven forms of communal sharing, which constitute a major

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<sup>50</sup> According to Hervieu-Léger, religious modernity is characterised by an impulse for individuals to build the meaning of their existence by themselves, based on their experiences and cultural resources. The essence of their effort consists in turning a meaningless sequence of events into a story. Pilgrim religiosity is defined by this autobiographical task; religious identification occurs when this personal search resonates with the tradition of a faith community, and is exclusively based on individual choice. Thus, the condition of religious pilgrim is based on a fluid, continuous dynamic of *bricolages*, allowing individuals to adjust their religious beliefs, language, and practices to the shape of their personal narrative. By definition, in Hervieu-Léger's view this religiosity is characterised by fragile, if at all existent, connections with religious institutions (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 98-99).

element of attraction for pilgrims. Feeling part of a global, universally welcoming fellowship of spiritual nomads constitutes an essential element in young people's motivations to visit Taizé. The emotional fusion experienced by participating in the Community's liturgy validates the existence of a spiritual community overcoming cultural, linguistic, and religious barriers. Taizé thus constitutes a model of a religiosity characterised by flexible connections with institutional Churches that embraces and validates individual, deregulated spiritual 'bricolages'. The Community can be seen as a source to which spiritual nomads go to temporarily quench their spiritual thirst. In this sense, it stands in radical contrast with traditional, sedentary forms of religiosity (Hervieu-Léger 1999). According to Hervieu-Léger, Taizé's pilgrims are, in fact, spiritual nomads with little or no attachment to institutional religion. In contrast with her research, my study will demonstrate that youth pilgrimages to Taizé constitute a resource that religious institutions use to offer their young people an opportunity to customise and broaden their faith experience. Therefore, in my view, young people's spiritual explorations at Taizé are not alternative but complementary and compatible with their institutional belonging, a thesis contradicting Hervieu-Léger's and Heelas and Woodhead's studies on contemporary spirituality (Hervieu-Léger 1999; Heelas 2005).

To further illuminate the subjective experience of young pilgrims at Taizé, Eek's study focused on the psychological effects of intense liturgical participation on individual attitudes to religion and worship (Eek 2001). His qualitative study involved a group of Swedish pilgrims of different ages and levels of religious familiarity and compared the variations occurring before and after their participation in worship at Taizé, analysed according to variables such as age, gender, religious familiarity, and frequency of church attendance. The outcome of their involvement was complex and non-linear but highlighted a progressing attitude among those individuals who initially had less familiarity with regular worship practice. For these individuals the experience of worship at Taizé represented a positive contrast with their previous, negative perceptions of church worship. On the contrary, regular church attenders worshipping at Taizé tended to react negatively as they missed the traditional elements of their church liturgy (sermon, hymns, pews, etc.) and found worship at the Community repetitive and boring.

From a different perspective, French sociologist Fabien Galué (Galué 2002) connected Taizé's success to the extensive expressive range the Community makes available to support young people's involvement, which includes spirituality, emotions, relationships,



aesthetics, and intercultural exchange—all in a perennial climate of festival. In his view, the extraordinary flexibility of the Community's mediated expressions, together with its universal inclusiveness, represents a genuine form of renewal of the pilgrimage tradition. Its specific appeal consists in the fact that it provides a customisable and time-compact religious option to a generation whose regular church involvement is declining.

Research conducted by Portuguese sociologist Helena Vilaça (Vilaça 2010) throws further light on the meanings underlying the Community's mediated expressions. In her study on pilgrimages as a contemporary expression of a privatised religious rituality, Vilaça highlights how Taizé's pilgrimages may be seen as form of temporary, participative enactment of a parable of a perfect world where denominational, social, cultural, and interpersonal barriers are overcome (Vilaça 2010: 150-51). The Community incorporates young people as partners in its utopian undertaking, actors in a prophetic, although ephemeral, performance. Vilaça's analysis, which builds upon Hervieu-Léger's research (Hervieu-Léger 1999), suggests that Taizé's mission could be explained as the incarnation of '*a double utopia: the return to the imagined purity of the primitive church and, through its interactive pluralism, the projection of a future, reconciled Christianity*' (Vilaça 2010: 151). Vilaça's research converges with Kubicki's observations concerning the performative nature of the Community's liturgical practices; furthermore, it rightly points out a restorationist undercurrent at work both in Brother Roger's theology and in Taizé's mediated expressions. This theme will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

In conclusion, this chapter showed how the progressive emergence of the Community's ministry to young people was intimately connected to its overall ecumenical calling, of which it constituted a coherent development. In light of the objective of this thesis, this implies that the theology mediated by Taizé in its practice with young people needs to be situated in the context of a broader theological understanding of its mission as related to the Church and to the world. Furthermore, the chapter contributed to problematise the long relationship between the Community and young people by introducing sociological and psychological factors interacting with it. The picture thus reconstructed highlights the complex nature of that relationship and the diverging aspirations intersecting at Taizé. This last point offers preliminary support for my research question, which suggested that the Community should be considered as an arena of different and sometimes competing interpretations. To further proceed in the exploration of this point, the next chapter will introduce the methodology that will guide my research.

## Chapter 2 - Research methodology

### 2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided both a historical overview of the development of the Taizé Community and a survey of the literature upon which this study will be built. Its objective was to gain a better understanding of the context within which youth pilgrimages to Taizé take place and to highlight the multilayered nature of this phenomenon. The theoretical pre-understandings gathered above will thus constitute the initial foundation of this thesis. As already anticipated, my research aims at exploring the practice of youth pilgrimages to Taizé from the perspective of the interplay between the theology mediated by the Community's practical expressions and its actual appropriation by young people. The interdisciplinary framework involved in the exploration of this subject suggests situating my study in the areas of practical theology and qualitative research.

As a distinctive academic discipline, practical theology is an umbrella term designating a theological study area of increasing complexity and fluidity of boundaries, whose general object has been defined by Ballard and Pritchard as concerned with *'the practice of the Christian community within the world'* (Ballard and Pritchard 2006: 18). As highlighted by contemporary research (Graham, Walton, and Ward 2005: 2-3; Evans 2000; Lynch 2005; Oden and Browning 1984; Farley 1983; Charry 2000), a theological concern for the lived dimension of Christian faith does not represent a new development within the Christian tradition. However, the use of this specific term is relatively recent and has its roots in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his perspective, practical theology constituted the fulfilment of all theology. In fact, he conceived it as a deductively elaborated, applicative outcome of the reflective work developed within the sub-disciplines of philosophical and historical theology (Cartledge 2003: 2). This implied a mono-directional focus on the accountability of practical theology that ultimately subordinated it to the other two theological sub-disciplines (Paver 2006: 8-10; Pattison and Lynch 2005: 409). As noted by Browning, Schleiermacher showed little appreciation for the way practice informs theological questions (Browning 1991: 43). Furthermore, his deductive approach tended to pay little attention to the contemporary context (Cartledge 2003: 2). Since then, his applicative view of practical theology has undergone significant criticism. At the heart of this debate was the issue of the relationship between theology and human experience. In this area Paul Tillich's correlational thought deeply influenced the modern development of practical theology. In his

view, theological reflection started from an exploration of the human situation. Its purpose was for people *'to understand the Christian message as the answer to the questions implied in their own and in every human situation'* (Tillich 1951: 1.8). While this approach was critiqued for limiting the role of practical theology to merely generating questions, Tillich's emphasis on the centrality of human experience and culture in the process of theological reflection was nevertheless extremely influential (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 77-78). In countries such as the United Kingdom, additional developments shaped practical theology's *'turn to the human'* (Pattison and Lynch 2005: 408). Among these were society's increasing movement towards pluralisation and Christianity's parallel marginalisation as source of authority. These shifts involved a refocusing of the theological debate on issues related to the significance of the Christian presence in the contemporary world. Other factors influencing a closer attention to the human dimension of faith were the rise in importance of disciplinary areas such as the social sciences, counselling, and education. Christian theology increasingly found itself entertaining dialogues with these disciplines due to the development of the caring professions, which provided models for clergy education and the assessment of voluntary work. Lastly, the turn to the human was also influenced by the emphasis on contextualisation in theology (exemplified for instance by Latin American liberation theologies), which highlighted the significance of living contexts in theological reflection and the centrality of orthopraxis as transformative action for justice. This last influence radically reoriented practical theology by emphasising the centrality of practice and the role of laity as theological agents (Ballard and Pritchard 2006: 3-6). As a result of these developments in the last decades, practical theology has been characterised by an ongoing methodological reflection, with a range of different positions being expressed concerning the relationship between theology and human experience.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, this area

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<sup>51</sup> Thus, for instance, the methodology elaborated by Swinton and Mowat in their book *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* deals with the theoretical issues involved in the dialogue between theology and social sciences by locating practical theology's role within the ongoing flow of God's self-revelation through Christ. Within this framework, Swinton and Mowat stress the primacy of revelation over human sciences (Swinton and Mowat 2006; Moschella 2012). Differently from them, Stephen Pattison's model of 'critical conversation' provides a more open-ended, dialogical approach to practical theological reflection. Pattison conceives practical theology as a conversation that can be developed at different levels between a person's own *'ideas, beliefs, experiences, feelings, perceptions and assumptions'*, *'the beliefs, perceptions and assumptions arising from the Christian community and tradition'*, the situation under consideration, and *'relevant insights, methods and findings that emerge from non-theological disciplines'*, see (Pattison 2000: 9-10). The 'critical conversation' metaphor is particularly effective, in Pattison's view, as it evokes a familiar process that implies a dialogue between multiple perspectives. Furthermore, conversations are often transformative for all parties involved. They imply a willingness to appreciate each other's contribution, the possibility to change one's views, face unsolved disagreements, or even accept silence and lack of communication, due to possible gaps between the Christian tradition and contemporary situations (Pattison 1989). Pattison integrates the influence of Liberation theologies by emphasising, however, that *'practical theology is not just talk for talk's sake. Nor is it an abstract, disconnected intellectual quest. Liberation theologies of various kinds suggest that theological activity must spring from, and feed into, practice in a concrete way. It must resist rather than colluding with oppression*

has witnessed a burgeoning of interdisciplinary approaches that have increasingly broadened its scope (Miller-McLemore 2012).

Given the subject of this thesis, my chosen methodological approach implies an interaction between practical theology and qualitative research methods. The use of qualitative methods constitutes an effective tool to explore religious practices in situ (Moschella 2012: 224). The aim of this kind of research is to understand religion as lived by ordinary individuals (McGuire 2008), in our case young people involved in organised pilgrimages to the Taizé Community. As highlighted by Mary Clark Moschella, this approach is particularly suited to explore the connections and gaps between stated and practiced beliefs, institutional and individual interpretations of doctrines, symbols, and rituals, and people's often diverging interpretations of shared religious practices (Moschella 2012: 224, 26). Furthermore, from a theological viewpoint the use of qualitative methods points out the significance of the views expressed by young participants as 'primary theologians'<sup>52</sup> (Moschella 2012: 228; Mellott 2009: 9).

In their book *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (Swinton and Mowat 2006), Swinton and Mowat have developed a methodological reflection on the theoretical issues concerning the integration between theology and social sciences. They define practical theology as a discipline characterised by a great diversity of approaches, which reflect a common commitment to interpret the multilayered nature of concrete situations and contexts (Swinton and Mowat 2006: v-vii, 3). At the centre of Swinton and Mowat's definition of practical theology is the idea of '*faithful performance of the gospel*' (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 4), a concept inspired by Stanley Hauerwas' metaphor of faith as performance (Homiletics 2011; Hauerwas 2004). Building on Bonhoeffer, Hauerwas critiques modern Christianity's primary identification of faith with belief; in his view faith can be defined as the embodied performance of a community that breathes life in and is shaped by a set of beliefs. In this sense, for Hauerwas Christianity can be likened to a drama—while it is based on a script, its actual meaning can only be appreciated 'on stage', in a constant, creative dynamic of enactment (Homiletics 2011).

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*in the interests of promoting human flourishing [...] Practical theology must, therefore, be a transformational activity in the arena of practice as well as in that of theory and understanding'* (Pattison 2000: 10).

<sup>52</sup> Mellott draws from Aidan Kavanagh's work on worship to define his idea of 'primary theologian'. For Kavanagh believers are primary theologians in the sense that through their participation in worship (which he considers as primary theology) they are involved in an encounter with God, rather than in mere reflection (secondary theology). In a similar way, Mellott makes a distinction between 'theologians' or 'professional theologians', and primary theologians as members of a community of faith. The two categories should not be considered as mutually exclusive, as many secondary theologians are also primary theologians (Mellott 2009: 9).

Reality is the interpretive context in which the Gospel is continuously brought to life, raising new questions and requiring new understandings of Christian traditions and practices. The work of the Spirit takes place in human experience, and the incessant questions posed by this incarnational dynamic are essential for a faithful development of theological thinking. This emphasis on faith as embodied performance constitutes the essential framework within which Swinton and Mowat elaborate their definition of practical theology. In their view, this discipline is entrusted with the uneasy but fundamental task of exploring the tension between, on the one side, the 'script' contained in God's revelation in Christ as historically formulated within the Scriptures and, on the other side, the continuing and innovative enactment of the Gospel in the life and practices of the Church as they interact with the world (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 5-6). In this sense, practical theology can be considered as a theology of action (Swinton and Mowat 2006: x). Its purpose is to generate a form of interpretive knowledge, or *phronesis*,<sup>53</sup> that may enable the faithful performance of the Gospel by taking seriously the complex dynamic of human beings' encounter with God (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 4). Swinton and Mowat provide the following definition of practical theology:

*Practical theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church, as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.* (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 6)

This description of the nature and task of practical theology raises important questions concerning the relationship between theology and experience. In the next section, I will proceed to discuss this definition in more detail.

## 2.2 Practical theology

At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced Swinton and Mowat's view of practical theology as taking root in an understanding of Christian faith as embodied performance, which emphasised human experience as the theatre of God's redemptive actions. This focus on the living dimension of faith implies the theological significance of practice; as pointed out in Swinton and Mowat's definition of practical theology, the faithfulness of believers' practices constitutes at the

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<sup>53</sup> Swinton and Mowat's idea of *phronesis* as form of theological knowledge connected to the life of individuals and communities is inspired by Farley's concept of *habitus*, which he defines as a form of holistic, practice-oriented wisdom related to salvation (Farley 2003: 4, 15-16, 26-28). In Swinton and Mowat's perspective the idea of *phronesis* has a strong missional connotation, as it '*reveals the coming kingdom in a tangible form. One does not simply proclaim the gospel with one's mind, but with the whole of one's being. Practical Theology is therefore a holistic discipline which sees theology as pertaining as much to embodied existence as to abstract intellectual propositions which demand particular cognitive dispositions*' (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 26-27).

same time the critical object and the final aim of practical theological reflection. Ackermann and Bons-Storm define this area as *'the theological discipline which is essentially involved with living, communicating and practicing the life of faith'* (Ackermann and Bons-Storm 1998: 1; Swinton and Mowat 2006: 9); Swinton and Mowat conceive practical theological reflection as a form of knowledge, enabling *'faithful living and authentic Christian practice'* (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 9). As such, practical theology is at the same time concerned with human experience and oriented towards a horizon that transcends it. In fact, as emphasised by Dykstra and Bass (Volf and Bass 2002: 21), this form of reflection presupposes a world that has been created and is continuously sustained by God, who is in the process of reconciling it through Christ. Believers are called to participate faithfully and truthfully in the progressive unfolding of God's redemptive work, which involves individuals and communities, in all the human complexity of their reality (Volf and Bass 2002: 21-22; Swinton and Mowat 2006: 21). Christian practices are expressions of a tradition that tries to understand and mediate the nature and purposes of God in the world; believers learn to act faithfully by participating in and reflecting on what Forrester calls *'the communicative practice of Jesus'* (Forrester 2000: 8). In this perspective the Church becomes, in Newbigin's terms, *'the hermeneutic of the Gospel'* (Newbigin 1989: 222-33), a place where the vision and purpose of the Gospel is interpreted, embodied, and communicated in the life and actions of Christ's followers.

This idea implies a substantial continuity between theology and practice; in Swinton and Mowat's words, *'belief is within the act itself'* (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 20). Christian practices are carriers of embedded theological meanings and more or less implicit moral principles that orient expectations and behaviours. They are rooted in specific social and cultural histories. Far from being the product of individual initiative, their development emerges from the life of entire communities over the course of long periods of time (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 21). As highlighted by Browning, however, the theory-laden character of embodied faith is often so taken for granted and considered as natural that practices rarely become a subject of critical reflection (Browning 1983: 6; Swinton and Mowat 2006: 20). Once they are complexified, however, they reveal themselves as contextually grounded, multilayered objects of theological interpretation. Therefore, Swinton and Mowat's practical theological methodology aims at questioning the apparent normality of our performances within the Church and in the world. Beyond the acknowledgement of the theological nature of practices, this perspective involves taking seriously the complexity of the situations and contexts in which actions take place. In this

sense, practical theology has a hermeneutical task, as it seeks to read and interpret specific situations and the practices performed in their context. Through an interdisciplinary form of exegesis of human experience, it aims at exploring, understanding, assessing, and critiquing those practices (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 12). Its guiding attitude, which can be qualified as an underlying hermeneutics of suspicion, implies awareness of human sinfulness and imperfection and, at the same time, trust in the possibility of moving further towards truth (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 10-11).

This idea of practical theology as knowledge enabling faithful Christian living (Forrester 2005: 50) has important implications. The first of these is an attention to the contextual nature of theology: faith lives and is embodied, expressed, interpreted, and shaped in specific contexts. This also implies that practical theology represents an essential contribution to the development of theological reflection, as its interpretive perspective takes into account the importance of situational dynamics (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 14). As highlighted by Forrester, practice is an essential means for Christians to allow for '*what is true*' to '*come to the light*' (Forrester 2005: 50). This disciplined commitment to interpreting concrete situations is often missing from theology. Without denying the importance of studying the texts of the Christian tradition, Swinton and Mowat suggest that a parallel emphasis should lie on reading the text of human and Church experience (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 15). This leads to a second, important point concerning the definition of practical theology as a search for '*truth in relation to action*' (Forrester 2005: 50), which relates to the idea of truth and the role of God's revelation. Practical theology finds its role in the uneasy space between God's revelation in Christ, as expressed in the Scriptures, and believers' creative, ongoing performance. However, it is important to emphasize that experience is not considered as an independent source of revelation. Embodied faith can lead to new theological understandings, as it can raise questions that more abstract forms of theological reflection would otherwise overlook. This constitutes an essential contribution to the continuing task of interpreting the Christian tradition and developing theological understanding (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 5-7). The very idea of '*faithful practice*', however, postulates the priority of divine revelation over experience. In this sense God's revelation in Christ, and not human life, is the central axis of practical theology. Practical theology is '*a response to and recognition of the redemptive actions of God-in-the-world and the human experience which emerges in response to those actions*' (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 11). From this viewpoint, it opens believers to the possibility of seeing the world differently and gives

meaning to our fragmented experience of reality. This leads us to a third and final issue concerning the conversation between practical theology and other theological disciplines. Swinton and Mowat emphasise the constructive but critical nature of this dialogue (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 13). The fragments of knowledge emerging from practical theology can contribute to develop or challenge accepted understandings, practices, and traditions. In this sense, the role of practical theological reflection can be defined as prophetic. Its dialogue with the revelation of Scripture, with Christian tradition, and with other theological disciplines is of crucial importance for its task, which is turned towards human experience but remains essentially theological (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 16-17). The hermeneutical nature of practical theology, with its commitment to critically explore the contextual dimension of Christian faith, appears particularly suitable to investigate a multilayered phenomenon like the practice of youth pilgrimages to Taizé. As we have seen in the literature review, a study of this subject potentially involves an interaction between theology and fields of knowledge such as history, anthropology, and social sciences. In the next section, I will focus specifically on Swinton and Mowat's understanding of practical theology as a methodology connecting theological reflection and human sciences in an interdisciplinary conversation aimed at enabling faithful Christian performance.

### **2.2.1 Epistemological foundations and practical theological methodology**

The framework illustrated above implies the necessity for practical theology to develop a methodological umbrella that may operationalize its specific hermeneutics of practice. The emphasis on the contextual dimension of practice points out the need to interact with empirical research methods to generate data able to support critical theological thinking. Social sciences and qualitative research, in particular, with its richly textured focus on local contexts, constitute a precious instrument in the pursuit of this goal (Swinton and Mowat 2006: viii). Swinton and Mowat's methodological reflection is, therefore, largely dedicated to finding a way for theology to interact with qualitative research, despite potentially conflicting epistemological foundations. According to Schutt (Schutt 2006: 43-44) qualitative research is based on a constructivist-interpretive theoretical approach. In the interpretivist perspective, reality is a social construction; the objective of social sciences is to explore and understand the subjective meanings individuals give to reality. Interpretivism stands in contrast with positivism as it rejects the idea of an objective reality accessible through scientific methods. In the interpretivist perspective, empirical data come to us shaped by our senses, preferences, prejudices, and interactions, and



therefore constitute individual interpretations of reality. Consequently, the interpretivist position is relativistic and challenges traditional notions of validity (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 192-205; Schutt 2006: 43-44; Rubin and Rubin 1995: 35).

Constructivism—or, according to Crotty's distinction (Crotty 1998: 42), constructionism<sup>54</sup>—builds on the interpretivist perspective: reality is interpreted and *constructed*, 'made up' by linguistic and cultural constructions. For constructionists, this does not imply denying the reality of these constructions, as '*what is defined or perceived by people as real is real in its consequences*' (Patton 2002: 96). Humans do not have access to a stable external reality; understanding is always contextually grounded, interpersonally shaped and limited as intrinsically perspectival. The aim of social science is to study the multiple realities constructed by people, as well as their influence on their lives and interactions with others. Through different methods social researchers try to capture the perspectives of different individuals involved in a specific phenomenon, and examine the implications of their multiple realities (Patton 2002: 98). As emphasised by Guba and Lincoln (Guba and Lincoln 1989), truth in this perspective is a matter of consensus between informed and sophisticated constructors. Facts have no meaning except than within a given value framework, and they cannot be objectively assessed. Causes exist only by imputation, and phenomena can be understood only within the specific context in which they are studied. Findings resulting from a constructionist research are further constructions built through a dialectic of comparison and contrast, shaped by the researcher's own situatedness (Creswell 2003: 8-9). In their final outcome, they constitute a further step towards a consensus about a phenomenon. Therefore, constructionism is '*ontologically relativist, epistemologically subjectivist, and methodologically hermeneutic and dialectic*' (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 48; Patton 2002: 98).

The non-foundational epistemology of qualitative research stands in tension with theology's assumption that truth is accessible through God's revelation. This difficulty implies the necessity for practical theologians to work towards a solution (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 37). In fact, while the constructionist epistemological framework of qualitative research emphasises the existence of multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon, it does not necessarily postulate that truth does not exist. This point opens the possibility of a mediation between qualitative research and

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<sup>54</sup> In Crotty's perspective, echoed by Patton, the term constructivism applies to the '*meaning-making activity of the individual mind*', while constructionism involves '*the collective generation of meaning*' (Crotty 1998: 58; Patton 2002: 97).

theological reflection. According to Swinton and Mowat, by making the familiar strange and allowing for different perspectives on the same phenomenon to emerge, researchers can actually lead their readers closer to ‘*an approximation of what reality may look like*’ (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 36). While qualitative researchers may not necessarily share this view, from a theological perspective it constitutes an attempt at acknowledging at the same time the interpretive, constructed nature of knowledge and the Christian faith in an accessible, divinely revealed truth. Swinton suggests situating this position in

*A continuum between a naïve realism that accepts that truth can be fully accessed through human endeavour, that is, that theoretical concepts find direct correlates within the world, and a form of mediated or critical realism that accepts that reality can be known a little better through our constructions while at the same time recognising that such constructions are always provisional and open to challenge.* (Swinton 2001: 97)

This epistemological perspective is rooted in the work of British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar 1975, 1979, 1986, 1989, 1991). In his view, modernity has tended to misconstrue the relationship between ontology and epistemology by restricting reality to what we know of it. Both realism and constructivism are founded on the same epistemic fallacy (McGrath 2003: 212; Wright 2013: 10-11). Reality is greater than our capacity to fully explore it and while our attempts at grasping it are certainly fallible, they are not necessarily mistaken. Critical realism is therefore *ontologically realistic*, as it recognises that an object may exist independently from our awareness of it. Our accounts of reality are not mere language games but relatively accurate, yet fallible and incomplete explanations relative to an intransitive ontological order (Wright 2013: 10-15). The existence of this diversity of perspectives implies that reality is multiform and stratified. Different forms of human knowledge – physics, chemistry, sociology, history, geography, literature, or theology – provide complementary perspectives on the same object or event.<sup>55</sup> Critical realism is, therefore, *epistemically relativistic*, as it acknowledges our limitations but does not reject the actual possibility to achieve genuine knowledge in the present or improve and expand upon it in the future. Furthermore, a critical realistic epistemological perspective requires the exercise of *judgemental rationality* to discriminate between more or less truthful accounts of reality; it does not postulate the existence of secure foundations or

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<sup>55</sup> According to McGrath, critical realism’s emphasis on the multifaceted nature of reality and its resistance to any form of reductionism constitute one of its most important contributions. In his words, ‘*One of the most important aspects of Bhaskar’s approach is that it demands that the different levels of reality be fully acknowledged. It is impossible to reduce reality to one ontological level, or to insist that what is “real” is determined by whether it can be “known” – often by the improper use of only one methodology, corresponding to one level of reality that such reductionism recognizes. Theology and the natural sciences recognize a plurality of levels of reality, and refuse to reduce everything to one level*’ (McGrath 2003: 225).

specific procedures to adjudicate between diverging truth claims. Epistemic tools need, in fact, to be adapted to the demands of reality, rather than reality being forced into our epistemic tools. Judgemental rationality thus involves a contextual critical hermeneutic, as it starts from what is already established – beliefs, traditions, knowledge, relationships – and tries to progressively refine, critique, and test it (Wright 2013: 10-15). In this sense, there is no neutral viewpoint, as our evaluations cannot abstract from our already existing beliefs. The objective is nevertheless to pursue the best possible explanation.<sup>56</sup>

Swinton and Mowat's epistemological position implies the necessity to elaborate a practical theological methodology that may operationalize the primacy of theology's truth claims while at the same time preserving a space of dialogue with other forms of knowledge, including qualitative research. This methodological approach is *hermeneutically focused*, as it acknowledges the centrality of interpretation in the way human beings interact with the world; it is *correlational*, as it tries to create a dialogue between theology and different perspectives, enabling a deeper understanding of the object under study; it is *critically oriented*, as it approaches a phenomenon with the awareness '*of the reality of human fallenness and the complexity of the forces which shape and structure our encounter with the world*' (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 76); finally, it is *theological*, as it sees the world from the perspective of the unfolding of God's narrative of redemption, a narrative that implies that divine truth is accessible to human beings (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 77). Swinton and Mowat call this methodological approach 'revised model of mutual critical correlation' (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 88). Its roots are in Tillich's correlational method, by which he tried to connect Christian theology and existential questions emerging from human experience (Tillich 1951). However, Swinton and Mowat's approach takes into account Hiltner's (Hiltner 1958) and Tracy's (Tracy 1975) critiques to Tillich's model. In their view, the correlational model is in fact merely unidirectional, as it applies Christian truth to the world without allowing the world to question theology's interpretations of the truth (Swinton 2001: 77-80). This weakness is countered by an alternative model, called mutual critical correlation, formulated by Hiltner (Hiltner 1958) and Tracy (Tracy 1975), which emphasises the mutuality of the dialogue between theology and other sources of knowledge but does not imply a priority of the first over the second. This methodological

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<sup>56</sup> In Swinton and Mowat's perspective, this implies that the idea of an objective form of truth is unsustainable. Our knowledge of reality is always expressed in interpretive terms. This implies a particular focus on the role and influence of the researcher. Rather than posing a problem, however, a researcher's involvement should be considered as '*a necessary and constructive dimension of the interpretative process*' (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 37).

approach is at the basis of models subsequently developed by various practical theologians including Stephen Pattison, whose method of 'mutual critical conversation' presents close affinities with Tracy's (Pattison 1989; Woodward, Pattison, and Patton 2000: 135-48). Swinton and Mowat elaborate on Pattison's model to emphasize the primacy of theology in the conversation with other forms of knowledge (Swinton 2001: 83-91). In doing this, they draw from Van Deusen Hunsinger's reflection on how to safeguard the primacy of truth and revelation while at the same time recognising the interpretive character of our relationship with the Christian tradition, on the one hand, and the possibility of interacting with other disciplines, on the other hand (Van Deusen Hunsinger 1995). To solve this issue Van Deusen Hunsinger turns to Barth and his analysis of the Christology reflected in the Chalcedonian creed. The relationship between theology and other forms of human knowledge is paralleled to that between Christ's two natures, divine and human:

*According to Barth's interpretation of Chalcedon, Jesus' divine and human natures, each present in a complete or unabridged way, were to be understood not only as related without confusion and change but also with conceptual priority assigned to the divine over human nature. (Van Deusen Hunsinger 1995: 63)*

In a similar way, theology and the sciences are marked by *indissoluble differentiation*, as they have different roles and represent forms of knowledge that should not be confused with each other, even when involved in the same conversation; they are also *inseparably united*, as their complementary perspectives can enhance theological understanding. Theology is asymmetrically related to other sources of knowledge (*indestructible order*), as it has a *logical precedence* over them. It is an independent source of knowledge that draws on them for clarification and complexification purposes but does not need them for its own self-understanding (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 86; Van Deusen Hunsinger 1995: 69). Emphasising the priority of theology over other forms of knowledge is coherent within a critical realist approach; in fact, it introduces an element of external truth within the conversation with other disciplines while, at the same time, maintaining an emphasis on the interpretive nature of knowledge and a critical, mutual interaction between theology and the sciences (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 88). In elaborating their revised model of mutual critical correlation, however, Swinton and Mowat do not limit themselves to integrating Van Deusen Hunsinger's approach but further clarify her focus on the priority of theology over other sources of knowledge. Theology's logical precedence needs to be moderated by an awareness that theology itself is an interpretive endeavour. Divine revelation is interpreted by human beings who are '*fallen*,

*contextually bound and have a variety of personal and denominational agendas'* (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 89). Context, history, traditions, individuals, and communities profoundly influence Christian practice and their faithfulness to revelation. Without undermining the priority of theology, critical reflection and openness to new interpretations need to be essential components of a practical theological approach.<sup>57</sup> This dimension of critical self-awareness or reflexivity is central to practical theology's goal of ensuring the faithfulness of Christian practices to God's self-revelation.

Within this framework the relationship between practical theology and other sources of knowledge, including qualitative research, needs to be characterised by three foundational elements. The first is *hospitality*, which implies theologians' openness and receptivity to insights from other forms of knowledge, even when interpreted from a Christian perspective. This implies attentiveness to voices other than theology, which should be taken seriously and seen as distinct and separate. The second element that needs to characterise practical theological reflection is *conversion*. Theologians' interaction with other sources of knowledge implies a specific orientation towards a purpose, so that these disciplines' contribution might be '*grafted in to God's redemptive intentions for the world*' (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 92). The idea of conversion also implies setting aside some aspects of the conversation—such as the constructivist epistemological foundation of qualitative research—to move towards positions more compatible with a recognition of the reality of God, as those expressed by a critical realistic framework. More than Van Deusen Hunsinger, Swinton and Mowat emphasise the mutuality of a dialogue where the other sources of knowledge do not simply have a passive role but can challenge theology in ways that can be transformative for both (Swinton and Mowat 2006). The third and final element characterising this practical theological approach is *critical faithfulness*. As highlighted above, acknowledging the divine nature of revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit in human beings does not exclude the interpretive nature of their relationship with that truth. This implies respect for the long tradition of Christian thinking that has preceded us in the attempt of understanding the divine revelation. However, it also involves a recognition

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<sup>57</sup> Drawing from Barth, Webster warns against the illusion of a 'pure' theology: '*There is no way in which we can step outside of ourselves and engage in some transcendental act of knowing which would lift us out of the creaturely conditions of knowing. But nor would he [Barth] say that all theology is simply socially constructed, because he thinks that theology is an activity in the Church and the Church is the sphere in which the Spirit is at work. The work of the Spirit doesn't mean that theology is somehow immunised against outside influences or made infallible; but it does mean that the theologian can expect guidance, protection and chastening in order to think in ways that are appropriate to the gospel. For Barth, theology is not a citadel of achieved ideas, but a process, the event of being stripped of what is not in accordance with the truth of the gospel and of learning how to think in correspondence to the event of God's self-communication*' (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 90).

of the tentative and dialectic nature of our views on God's truth. These need to be kept faithful through a committed, critical dialogue between specific situations, Christian tradition, and the insights drawn, among others, from sources of knowledge such as qualitative research (Swinton and Mowat 2006).

The practical theological methodology formulated by Swinton and Mowat includes four basic stages, which synthesise the theological principles discussed above. The first consists in an initial exploration of the nature of the situation under study. This phase allows the researcher to gain a preliminary understanding of the key issues involved and to articulate her first observations on *what appears to be going on* (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94). To this end, the researcher may survey the literature related to the phenomenon under study and gather historical and cultural elements on its origins and development. This exploration leads to refine the initial research question and sharpen the focus of the study, which nevertheless should remain critically open. In my case, this step involved a reconstruction of the historical development of the Community and a review of relevant literature (Chapter One). In light of the objective of the thesis, a further chapter also included include a study of the theology underlying Taizé's ministry with young people (Chapter Three). Swinton and Mowat's second stage involves a *cultural and contextual analysis* of the phenomenon in question (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94-96). In this phase qualitative research plays an important role in helping practical theologians to understand the complexity of a situation. This phase may also involve an interdisciplinary dialogue with other forms of knowledge that may help the researcher to challenge, confirm or deepen her initial observations and understand the dynamics underlying the practice under study. In my thesis this stage involved a qualitative study on the experience of two groups of British young people involved in a pilgrimage to Taizé (Chapter Four). A further help in interpreting the practice of youth pilgrimage in this context was provided by a discussion of the data in light of insights drawn from the area of pilgrimage studies (Chapter Five). The third stage of Swinton and Mowat's cycle involves a theological reflection on the insights emerging from the study (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 96). This passage does not imply the absence of theology from the previous phases but rather a more formal engagement to highlight the theological significance of the understandings gained throughout the previous analyses. In this phase (Chapter Six), the theological implications of the conversation are brought to the surface in a critical search for enhanced faithfulness and deeper understanding of God's revelation. The fourth and final stage of this cycle implies a return to the practice originally under

study to highlight emerging insights, suggest renewed forms of Christian performance, and enable transformation in a more faithful and authentic direction (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 96-97). In my study the insights deriving from this phase of Swinton and Moffar's reflective cycle have been included in Chapter Six. Having clarified the overarching methodology of this thesis, I will now introduce the qualitative methods adopted in my research.

## 2.3 Empirical research methodology

### 2.3.1 Qualitative research

Among the reasons for the specific relevance of qualitative research in the study of social life, Flick mentions the '*progressive pluralisation of life worlds*' (Flick 2006: 2). Qualitative research takes its present significance from the postmodernist idea of the end of master narratives and their fragmentation into multiple and contextually limited narratives (Lyotard 1979). In this context, social research is confronted with the issue of how to give an account of the increasing individualisation and complexity of individual worlds. It is here that qualitative research assumes particular relevance in that it makes use of inductive strategies through which theories emerge from empirical exploration as forms of 'local knowledge' or are adopted to guide empirical study as 'sensitising concepts'<sup>58</sup> (Geertz 1983, 2000).

Merriam defines qualitative research as an umbrella concept including several different forms of social inquiry whose aim is '*to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible*' (Merriam 1998: 5). The philosophical background of this methodology is the idea that individuals construct reality by interacting with their social worlds. The aim of a social researcher is to understand the meaning of those individual constructions and how people make sense of their experiences (Merriam 1998: 6).

With reference to the methods adopted in qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln provide a helpful definition:

*Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms*

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<sup>58</sup> The idea of sensitising concepts implies that an observer never enters a field as a blank slate: '*While the inductive nature of qualitative inquiry emphasizes the importance of being open to whatever one can learn, some way of organising the complexity of experience is virtually a pre-requisite for perception itself*' (Patton 2002: 279). Denzin describes this process in more detail: '*The observer moves from sensitizing concepts to the immediate world of social experience and permits that world to shape and modify its conceptual framework. In this way he moves continually between the realm of more general social theory and the worlds of native people. Such an approach recognizes that social phenomena, while displaying regularities, vary by time, space and circumstance*' (Denzin 1978: 9). A similar idea is also expressed by Blumer (Blumer 1969: 148).

*of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand.* (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 3)

As such, qualitative research is particularly suitable for integration with Swinton and Mowat's practical theological methodology, which is grounded in an emphasis on the contextual and interpretive nature of knowledge, and according to which reality is to be conceived as complex and multilayered.

Implicit in Denzin's definition is the idea that in qualitative studies the researcher is the main research instrument, as she keeps a close relationship of responsiveness with the context (Merriam 1998: 7). This responsiveness is translated at different levels: from a personal perspective, qualitative research involves critical self scrutiny and active reflexivity, or a researcher's capacity to be constantly aware of her role in the process and to submit this to the same rigorous scrutiny as the rest of the data. This emphasis on reflexivity derives from the conviction that the researcher cannot assume a neutral, objective, and detached position in her relationship with the knowledge emerging from the research process (Mason 2002: 7; Gadamer 1975).

This responsiveness translates into the necessity for the researcher to go to the people and observe their behaviour in its natural setting. In terms of research methods, responsiveness to the context also implies the possibility of changing methods and adapting them to the circumstances and, as the study evolves, to explore emerging patterns (Merriam 1998: 7; Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 3-4). In this sense, qualitative research corresponds to the methodological emphasis on flexibility characteristic of the critical realistic epistemological perspective adopted by Swinton and Mowat.

Another specific feature of qualitative research is that its final product is '*richly descriptive*', as '*words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon*' (Merriam 1998: 8). One of the means to achieve richly descriptive explanations of an event, situation, or context is to apply triangulation. This can be done at different levels. Flick defines triangulation as the observation of a research issue from different



viewpoints, whose aim is less to ensure validation<sup>59</sup> than to justify knowledge by extending the possibilities of discovery related to the phenomenon under investigation (Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004: 178-80).

Among the different forms of triangulation discussed by Denzin (Denzin 1989: 297-313), the present study will adopt two. The first will be *data triangulation*, which consists in integrating data coming from different sources, collected at different moments, and from different people. This triangulation will be applied by involving different units or groups of individuals in our case study, as we will see below. The second triangulation strategy, defined as '*between-method*' or '*explicit triangulation*', is explained by Flick (Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004: 180) as the deliberate combination of methods of field observation. In our case, we will adopt two different methods, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Data triangulation will allow extending the range of possible meanings attributed by young people to their experience at Taizé; between-method triangulation will ensure, with participant observation, the opportunity to analyse young people's interactions within their context, while interviews will make it possible to shed light on the constructions of meaning individual young people attribute to their experience at Taizé.

As umbrella term qualitative research includes different strategies of inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, 2000; Yin 2003: 1). The strategy adopted in this thesis is case study research, which I will proceed to define in the next section.

## 2.4 Research strategy

### 2.4.1 Case study research

According to Punch, the basic idea of case study implies the in-depth exploration of a case, or a limited number of cases, by adopting whatever research methods seem appropriate. The objective is to develop '*as full an understanding of the case as possible*' (Punch 2005: 144).

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<sup>59</sup> The concept of validation through triangulation, in its early formulation by Denzin, has been critiqued by several scholars and is now seen in more nuanced terms: '*Which form of congruence of results can be achieved with triangulation? If methods that are used have different qualities, it is not so much identical results that we should expect. Rather it is complementary or convergent results that we can be expected [...]. Convergence means that the results fit into each other, complement each other, lie on one level, but do not have to be congruent [...]. This means giving up the claim that triangulation – as an equivalent to correlation – allows validating methods in results in a traditional sense. If you want to assess the complementarity of results, much more theoretical effort is necessary than if you want to assess congruence via correlation numerically. In the context of qualitative research, we cannot expect such unambiguous results and criteria to judge the reliability of single methods and results. Rather we should expect an extension of knowledge potential and rather an extended than a reduced need for [theory-driven] interpretation, as Kockeis-Stangl makes clear: "Instead of talking about validation, perhaps it would be more adequate to see our control processes as more perspective triangulation theory-driven [...] and to be prepared in advance for receiving as a result no uniform picture but rather one of a kaleidoscopic kind"*' (Flick 2007: 47).

According to Merriam, the goal of a case study is to '*gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved*' (Merriam 1998: 19). Yin emphasises that case studies allow the researcher to preserve the '*holistic*' and '*meaningful*' features of real life events, which is particularly important when the boundaries between a phenomenon and its context are not evident (Yin 2003: 2, 13). Drawing from (Cronbach 1975: 123), Merriam and Merriam (Merriam 1998: 29) differentiate between other research strategies and case study, which they define as '*interpretation in context*'. By focusing on a single unit or case—in this instance, individuals visiting Taizé—the researcher tries to explore the interactions of significant factors that characterise a phenomenon, such as Taizé's practice with young people.

In this sense, case study research involves, differently from other research strategies, the intensive description of a bounded system. This can consist of a single youth, a group, a school, a hospital, or a community studied at a single point in time or over a period of time (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000: 181; Silverman 2005: 127). The study is used as a real life example to better understand complex social phenomena (Yin 2003: 2). Despite the fact that case studies can sometimes be associated with quantitative methodologies, their nature of intensive, in-depth descriptions makes them particularly suitable to qualitative research, which emphasises the interpretive and subjective dimensions of a phenomenon (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000: 181; Merriam 1998: 19; Gerring 2007: 10).

Qualitative case studies are characterised by three features (Merriam 1998: 29-30): they are *particularistic*, in that they focus on a phenomenon and use a specific case to explore it; they are *descriptive*, because through in-depth analysis they are intended to produce thick descriptions of the case; lastly, they are *heuristic*, as their aim is to highlight unknown relationships or variables that may influence the rethinking of a phenomenon, and '*bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the researcher's experience, or confirm what is known*' (Merriam 1998: 30).

Merriam and Merriam (Merriam 1998: 38-39) identify three main models of case study research, based on their overall intent. The first is *descriptive* and *atheoretical*,<sup>60</sup> as it aims at providing a thick description of a case, but is not oriented by existing theories or by the intention of building generalisations. The second model is *interpretative* and *inductive*. This is also richly descriptive, but its final objective is to develop new theories or conceptual categories, or to exemplify,

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<sup>60</sup> The idea of a purely descriptive and a-theoretical approach to case study research is generally criticised (Mason 2002: 7-8; Merriam 1998: 47-49; Silverman 2005: 127-28).

further confirm, or challenge previous theoretical assumptions. Finally, *evaluative* case studies aim at describing, explaining, and evaluating dynamics and activities and are used particularly in educational settings.

This study adopts the design of a qualitative, interpretive case study as the most suitable one to answer the research question. Case study research, with its focus on real life instances of a phenomenon, will allow a rich, in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, its emphasis on 'bounded units' will ensure a holistic perspective, necessary for a research involving multiple variables and a complex social setting like the Taizé Community. The interpretive orientation of this case study will imply a focus on discovering insights that may complexify my initial theoretical assumptions and allow new hypotheses to emerge. In line with Swinton and Mowat's focus on faithful performance, the insights emerging from this study will be also considered for their potential to challenge existing practices and illuminate new youth ministry perspectives.

#### **2.4.2 Qualitative case studies and sampling strategies**

In case studies, different methods can be adopted to choose the unit or units involved in a study, depending on the research purpose. In our case, since statistical generalisation does not correspond to the in-depth, particularistic, and descriptive nature of qualitative research, probabilistic sampling will not be applied (Merriam 1998: 61).

This research will rather adopt a non-probabilistic, *purposive* or *purposeful* sampling method. Patton argues that '*the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth*' (Patton 2002: 230). The objective of purposive sampling is not generalisation but in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Patton 2002: 230; Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 370). Drawing from Chein (Selltiz et al. 1981: 440), Merriam and Merriam compare purposive sampling to a situation in which a group of experts is called to give their advice about a difficult case. The reason behind their involvement is not that they represent the average opinion but that, due to their characteristics, they are considered to be competent to answer a specific question (Merriam 1998: 61). This example implies that a researcher who follows a purposive sampling method needs to identify a set of essential selection criteria defining the profile of her 'experts', the people or groups of people to be studied. These criteria depend on the research purpose and the theoretical framework of the research.

Non-probabilistic, purposive sampling can correspond to different typologies, depending on the objective of the study. In my case, the aim of the research is to explore the meanings a typical sample of young people attributes to their experience at Taizé. Consequently, the sampling typology that better corresponds to the aims of this qualitative, interpretive case study is that of a *typical sample* (Merriam 1998: 62; Patton 2002: 236). This is defined by Merriam and Merriam as '*one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation or instance of the phenomenon of interest*' (Merriam 1998: 62). This sampling approach is based on a preliminary definition of the profile of the people typically involved in the phenomenon under study.

Taizé defines its *typical* age target as primarily including young people aged seventeen to twenty-nine. Individuals aged thirty to thirty-five are also accepted (Taizé 2008c). The Community welcomes both individual young people and organised groups. However, as stated in the Community's website, chaplaincy and parish-organised groups tend to represent the average attendance at Taizé (Taizé 2008b, 2008a, 2009b). This information is confirmed by Escaffit and Rasiwala (Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 156-57). Taizé provides a weeklong programme, including a standard cycle of activities in which pilgrims participate from Sunday to Sunday. Based on this general definition of Taizé's average attendance, my purposive, typical sample included young people aged eighteen to thirty-five attending a weekly Taizé summer programme. As group visits tend to represent the prevalent mode of attendance, the sample was recruited by contacting young people participating in organised group trips to Taizé. As this research was based in the United Kingdom, I concentrated my attention on groups based in this country.

My fieldwork experiences at Taizé suggest that participation in a group does not necessarily exclude the presence of individual pilgrims. Organised trips do not necessarily involve young people who live in the same parish or attend the same school, college, or university. This is due to two main factors: to ensure a sufficient number of participants, the promotion of an organised trip to Taizé can cover multiple schools, colleges, universities, and parishes; in addition to this, advertising also operates unofficially through youth networks and can attract people from different places, based on individual contacts. In this sense, organised groups should not be seen as homogeneous entities implying a specific institutional belonging. Taizé regularly updates a webpage providing a full list of UK groups visiting the Community during the coming months. The webpage emphasises that groups '*are open for individual young people to join them for the journey to Taizé and for preparatory meetings beforehand*' (Taizé 2009b). For

these reasons, a sampling focused on organised group trips potentially implies reaching individual visitors, too.

According to Merriam and Merriam (Merriam 1998: 65), the number of people involved in a case study cannot be defined in advance, as it needs to take into account the data progressively collected, the patterns emerging from the analysis, and the limitations imposed by the resources available to support the study. Lincoln and Guba emphasise that *'In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations [...]. The sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units'* (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 202). Therefore *redundancy* is the criterion defining the size of a sample. However, Patton (Patton 2002: 246) argues that while redundancy is an important ideal criterion, it leaves the issue of sample size virtually unsolved. Consequently, he suggests defining the sample size based on *'judgment and negotiation'* (Patton 2002: 246). The researcher should define a minimum sample size based on a reasonable coverage of the phenomenon explored. This may be subsequently expanded, depending on how the fieldwork and the data analysis develop. My typical sample was composed of two sub-units, corresponding to two youth groups involved in an organised trip to Taizé, and included a total of twenty young people. The regulations in place at the Taizé Community concerning the presence of adults, including researchers, strictly limited to a one-week stay per year, severely affected the possibility of including further sub-units within an acceptable timeframe. My fieldwork took place during two consecutive summers (2009 and 2010) and involved joining two diocese-organised, Anglican youth pilgrimages participating in Taizé's typical youth oriented programme, a weekly retreat.

#### **2.4.3 Validity and reliability in qualitative case studies**

Swinton and Mowat's approach to practical theology strongly emphasises faithful performance, which makes the issue of the validity and reliability of the research process particularly sensitive. In a qualitative study, where in-depth understanding is the primary focus of the research,

*Validity and reliability are concerns that can be approached through careful attention to the study's conceptualization and the way in which the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented.* (Merriam 1998: 199-200).

Internal validity is concerned with the extent to which research findings reflect the reality investigated. However, this definition of validity is problematic at many levels. Data are not self-explanatory: they need an interpreter, who cannot observe a phenomenon without changing it.

Furthermore, qualitative research assumes reality as multidimensional and ever-changing. Therefore, basing validity on a correspondence between data and reality would be inappropriate (Merriam 1998: 202). Lincoln and Guba emphasise that reality is constituted of multiple mental constructions (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 295). Qualitative research, which involves people as the main instruments of data collection and analysis, can access individual constructions through observation and interviews and, in this sense, is closer to reality than quantitative research. The in-depth, richly descriptive nature of qualitative research becomes a strength in terms of validity, as it requires understanding the complexity of the meanings and behaviours individually associated with the phenomenon under study, in the context where they occur (Merriam 1998: 203).

From this perspective, some possible ways to enhance validity are: *triangulation* (the recourse to multiple investigators, sources of data, or methods), intended as a way to expand and enrich the understanding of a phenomenon; *long term or repeated observation* of the same phenomenon over a period of time to further strengthen the validity of the findings; careful attention to a *researcher's bias*, which implies the early clarification of her theoretical assumptions and epistemological perspective (Merriam 1998: 205; Grinnell and Unrau 2008: 455; Merriam 2002: 26). These validation strategies will be applied in this study.

Reliability is usually connected to internal validity on the base of the assumption that a study is more valid if the same results are obtained through repeated observations of the same phenomenon. However, the multifaceted, contextual, and particularistic nature of qualitative research makes this concept of reliability particularly problematic. Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 301-31) prefer to reformulate the concept of reliability as *consistency* and *dependability* of the results of a research. Instead of relying on the replicability of the same results by different researchers, reliability focuses on the possibility that other researchers, given the data collected, may consider its results as consistent and dependable. To achieve this result, researchers can use techniques such as triangulation, attention to the researcher's bias, and audit trail. Merriam illustrates the concept of audit trail by a metaphor: '*just as an auditor authenticates the account of a business, independent readers can authenticate the findings of a study by following the trail of the researcher*' (Merriam 2002: 222). In the same line, Dey argues that while a researcher cannot expect others to replicate her same account, she can still explain in detail how she came to those results, so that other researchers might be able to scrutinise the

process and decide if the results are consistent and dependable and therefore reliable (Dey 1993: 259).

External validity is connected with the generalisation of the findings of a research. The preliminary condition for generalisation is internal validity, and therefore the consistency and dependability of the study. However, the concept of generalisation as intended in quantitative research relies on conditions (equivalence between sample and population; predefined, controlled random sampling) not applicable to qualitative studies, which rely on small scale, non-probabilistic sampling aimed at understanding a specific reality (Merriam 1998: 208). This issue has led qualitative researchers to rethink the concept of generalisation. Erickson has reformulated the idea of generalisation with the notion of '*concrete universals*'<sup>61</sup> (Wittrock 1986: 130; Merriam 1998: 210; Ercikan and Roth 2009: 56); Stake goes in the same direction with his idea of '*naturalistic generalisation*'<sup>62</sup> (Stake 1995: 85-87). Lincoln and Guba have suggested the concept of '*user generalisability*', which will be adopted in this study. User generalisability is the notion of generalisation most commonly adopted in qualitative research (Merriam 1998: 211). In this view, the reader-user is in charge of defining to what extent a study's findings can be applied to other situations. Eisner argues that the debate on generalisability is based on the idea that individual and non-generalisable studies are limited in their contribution to the accumulation of knowledge, and he emphasises that in qualitative research the accumulation of knowledge happens through a horizontal—not vertical—process, as an '*expansion of our conceptual tools*', which takes place by individual extrapolation (Eisner 1998: 211). According to Merriam and Merriam, this perspective highlights the importance for the researcher to provide thick descriptions that may enable the reader to assess the similarities and differences between the context explored by the researcher and her actual situation (Merriam 1998: 211-12; 2009: 220-28). Other useful strategies to facilitate generalisation in the sense illustrated above are: applying a *typicality or modal category*, which implies highlighting the extent to which an event or an individual are typical if compared with others of the same class, so that the reader might be helped to set the limits within which her situation is similar or different to that explored by the

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<sup>61</sup> In this view, '*The search is not for abstract universals arrived at by statistical generalisation from a sample to a population, but for concrete universals arrived at by studying a specific case in great detail and then comparing it with other cases studied in equally great detail*' (Wittrock 1986: 130). The general lies in the particular, and as in usual life, we transfer what we learn in a specific situation to similar situations subsequently encountered in our life (Merriam 1998: 210).

<sup>62</sup> According to Stake, a comprehensive understanding of the particular opens the way to discovering similarities in new contexts, based on each individual's personal experience and knowledge. In this sense, research is a form of vicarious experience (Stake 1995: 85-87).

researcher; employing *multisite designs*, as to say, '*using several sites, cases, situations, especially those that maximise diversity in the phenomenon of interest*' (Merriam 1998: 212). Diversifying the observations allows applying the findings to a greater number of possible situations. These strategies will be applied in my research.

## **2.5 Empirical methods**

According to Mason, the choice of methods is dictated by the research question, by the epistemological framework adopted in the study, and by the kind of knowledge or evidence required to solve the intellectual riddle at the centre of the study (Mason 2002: 27). My research question concerns the interplay between the theology mediated by the Community and the meanings young pilgrims attribute to their experience. The problem is investigated from a critical realistic epistemological perspective, which focuses on individuals' actions and interpretations as revelatory of a complex and multilayered reality. This form of exploration is multidimensional and involves the naturalistic observation of young people's daily routines, behaviours, interactions, use of language, and participation in the activities related to their experience at Taizé. These elements need to be considered in their different and interrelated aspects, which are only accessible through observation in a naturalistic setting. Furthermore, to complement participant observation and have an in-depth understanding of pilgrims' subjective perspectives, I will also make use of semi-structured interviews.

### **2.5.1 Participant observation**

According to Merriam and Merriam (Merriam 1998: 94-95), participant observation is different from interviews under two profiles: it takes place in the very context where a phenomenon occurs; it represents a form of holistic, first-hand encounter between the researcher and the phenomenon observed, while interviews focus on another individual's interpretations of it. This implies that participant observation and interviews are often considered as complementary methods and associated in many research designs. According to Patton, the use of participant observation brings multiple advantages (Patton 2002: 232). In fact, it provides a holistic understanding of the context in which people interact. Furthermore, it challenges the researcher to be open and discovery-oriented, as the immersion in the context allows her to question pre-understandings and highlight aspects of the phenomenon which may go unnoticed or be taken for granted during interviews (Wolcott 1990: 22-23).



According to Patton a further advantage of participant observation is that through it the researcher becomes herself a source of data (Patton 2002: 263-64). As a first-hand encounter, participant observation can play a significant role during the interpretive stage of the analysis. Holstein and Gubrium recommend that researchers plan on interviewing only after a more or less extended time of observation, ranging from a few days to a more extended period (Gubrium and Holstein 2001: 188). This strategy brings several advantages. Among them are a better understanding of the informants' activities, behaviours, and interactions as related to the phenomenon under study and the possibility to situate the interviewees' language, perceptions, and interpretations in their natural context. At the same time, participant observation can significantly help the researcher to gain rapport with the informants. Following one of the strategic options suggested by Holstein and Gubrium (Gubrium and Holstein 2001: 188), in my research I utilised participant observation as an exploratory stage in which to prepare for my interviews.

During the summers of 2009 and 2010, I participated in two youth pilgrimages to Taizé organised by British Anglican dioceses. The first group involved ten young people, all in the age group eighteen to twenty-nine, accompanied by a leader (a vicar of an urban parish) and three adults who joined the trip as participants. My participation in this first pilgrimage was conceived as a preliminary exploration and involved being a participant observer and doing some pilot interviews. The second pilgrimage included twenty young people, ten of whom were between eighteen and thirty-five years old, and two adult participants. Four leaders, all of whom were Anglican clergy members, accompanied the group. In this second case, my fieldwork included both participant observation and interviewing. Both pilgrimages involved travelling by coach with the groups from London to Taizé and back and spending the entire week with them at the Community.

An observer's status can be qualified in different ways, ranging from complete participant to complete observer (Merriam 1998: 100-01). Her position is usually determined by theoretical, personal, or practical considerations. In my case, the choice was influenced by issues of access and by organisational aspects connected to the Taizé Community. My status, first, had to be negotiated with the gatekeepers, the leaders in charge of the organisation of the two pilgrimages. In both cases they considered it ethically appropriate to inform their youth groups about the reasons for my participation. It was agreed that I would take an overt role and be introduced to the group as a doctoral student who was conducting a study on young people's

experience at Taizé. In the case of the first group, as participants never met physically before the trip, the leader informed them via a short e-mail. The message included a letter by which I presented the project and asked for cooperation. The leader maintained a neutral position towards the initiative and let participants be free to express their opinion about my potential involvement in the pilgrimage. The leader of the second group, differently from the first, expressed enthusiasm for the possibility that his group might be involved in research on Taizé's pilgrimages, which he considered to be much needed. As a consequence, during the preparatory meeting he had with young people, prior to our departure, my role was explained and participants were encouraged to participate. In both cases my overt status as a researcher created positive interest among members of the youth groups, which were constituted mostly of university students who were generally very willing to offer their contributions. However, the difference of attitude in the leaders of the second group helped significantly in building rapport and gathering data, with young people not just neutrally accepting my presence, as in the case the first group, but being positively interested and cooperative. During the travel from London to Taizé and in the first days of my stays, I intentionally tried to build bridges with youth, have informal conversations, spend time with them, differentiate my role from that of the leader and the adult members of the group, and be perceived, as much as possible, as a participant like them. My efforts in this sense aimed at making my presence as least obtrusive as possible.

In the case of the first group, my participation in young people's daily activities was limited both by the organisation of the activities at Taizé and by restrictions imposed by the group leader. The Community's primary focus is on young people aged seventeen to twenty-nine, but young adults up to the age of thirty-five are also accepted. Adults are welcome, although with important restrictions concerning the length and frequency of their stay, which is firmly limited to one week a year. Furthermore, adults' presence at the Community is subject to regulations aimed at prioritising young people's peer interactions. Thus, while young people attend the main programme of Bible introductions and group discussions, group leaders and adult visitors are invited to follow a different set of meetings, including specifically designed Bible introductions and group discussions. Adults must also consume their meals separately from young people in a specifically allocated sector at the far periphery of the site, where their Bible introductions and group discussions take place.

Adults and young people join at specific times during the daily programme, as both participate in the three worship services which structure everyday life at Taizé. Another shared part of the

programme are the afternoon workshops, unless they are targeted to a specific age group. However, given the significant attendance at the worship services, group leaders, adults, and young people are only occasionally able to sit side by side. In the case of my first youth group, the vicar in charge of the organisation emphasised the importance of letting 'young people be free'. On the arrival day, the group was entrusted to the Community and the adults (me included) had to follow their own programme. During the rest of the week, the leader and other adults in this group always remained separate and never attended a worship service with their youth. By contrast, the attitude of the second group's leaders was very different, as they never completely surrendered responsibility for their young people to the Community. Rather, they actively tried to build community among the members of the group by camping with them, spending time at the camp in conversation, playing during young people's free time, and generally being very intentional about unity within the group. Differently from the first case, where young people functioned as a separate unit from the leaders, the second group was well integrated, and leaders were perceived as a core part of the community.

Group leaders adopt different strategies for negotiating their interaction with Taizé's age-based organisation, depending on the way they conceive their leadership role and the objectives of the trip. In the case of the first group leader, she used to take one of her daily meals with her youth group, while she had the others in the adult area.<sup>63</sup> In addition to this, she usually set a fixed time of the day, in the evening, to meet her young people in the recreational area of the Community, a space open to both youth and adults. Differently from her, the leaders of the second group never had a single meal in the adult area. Upon the leaders' suggestion, meal times were used as an opportunity to find each other and spend time together after daily activities. Young people embraced this habit, which became an important part of the group's daily routine. In the case of the first group, I tried to differentiate my role from that of the leader and the other adults in order to have more opportunities to spend time with their young people. Rather than consuming most of my meals in the adult area, I shared them with the youth group, which met at a fixed place. In general, I tried to avoid having my presence be identified as that of a group leader, and gradually worked to be accepted within young people's space. I sat within their circle (when present, the leader and the adults ate in the same place but occupied a

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<sup>63</sup> At Taizé, meal tickets are colour-coded according to categories (adult or youth). Adults are allowed to eat in the youth area only if they require vegetarian food, which is not provided in the adult sector. Leaders of both groups used this expedient to eat their meals with their young people.

separate space) and attended worship services with them. With the second group this was not necessary, as leaders and young people sat in a circle in the same eating area. Thanks to the early introduction and clear support from the leader, rapport was built easily and quickly.

A further consequence of these different leadership styles involved my participation in one of the main youth activities at Taizé, the morning Bible introductions and subsequent group discussions. While in the first case the leader saw my participation with the youth group in the main youth programme as potentially disruptive and therefore to be avoided, during the second pilgrimage the leaders actively supported my attendance.

In both cases, as the days went by, my role evolved dynamically. The limitations imposed both by my preliminary negotiations with the group leaders (particularly in the first case) and by the structure of the interactions between adults and young people at Taizé initially tended to define my position as that of an observer as participant. In time and through interaction this evolved to become, especially with the second group, closer to that of a participant as observer (Merriam 1998: 100-04; Adler and Adler 1987: 13; Flick 2006: 140). My participation in the field followed a semi-structured model of observation,<sup>64</sup> oriented by the theoretical pre-understandings highlighted in the previous chapter (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000: 305). In taking field notes I followed Flick's strategy (Flick 2006: 140), which suggests starting with a broad approach defined as *descriptive observation*. Initially, this strategy aims at providing a non-specific description, allowing the researcher to grasp the overall complexity of the context.<sup>65</sup> The elements emerging from this first stage constitute the foundation for a subsequent, more focused stage of observation. While writing I took care to act discreetly, so as not to be seen by the young people; my field notes ranged from short phrases to detailed descriptions of interactions, conversations and behaviours, depending on the circumstances and on the presence of other people. As a general rule, I sketched my notes as soon as possible during my observations, and later in the day I took time to revise and expand them.

Despite the limitations discussed above, being a participant observer helped me to situate my understanding of Taizé's history, theology, and development as a youth oriented ministry in a living context characterised by behaviours, interactions, modes of participation, and negotiated meanings. This allowed me to complexify my theoretical pre-understandings, question initial

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<sup>64</sup> According to Cohen, semi-structured observation 'will have an agenda of issues but will gather data to illuminate these issues in a far less pre-determined and systematic manner' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000: 305).

<sup>65</sup> However, even at descriptive stage, I often shifted from a 'wide angle' to a 'narrow angle' perspective, and focused on individual young people, interactions, patterns of language and modes of participation in Taizé's activities (Merriam 1998: 105).

assumptions, and focus my reflection on elements I had previously underestimated. Furthermore, the observations and pilot interviews gathered during my participation in the first pilgrimage contributed to refine my interview outline. As participant observer, I also became more sensitive to individual differences among participants in a group, which allowed me to better target my interactions during the following interviews.

## **2.6 Interviews**

According to Patton, interviews aim to discover things we cannot access through observation (such as feelings, opinions, beliefs, and intentions), to explore situations related to an individual's past, or to probe contexts inaccessible to the researcher's observation (Patton 2002: 340). Even more importantly, interviews allow for understanding how people see the world and the meanings they attach to their activities. Merriam and Merriam consider interviewing to be the best method for case studies focusing on the perspectives of a limited number of individuals, as it allows access to better and more data than other methods (Merriam 1998: 72). Depending on the theoretical design of the research project, it is possible to adopt different styles of interviewing, ranging from the more structured—closer to the model of a survey—to the more informal and open-ended. However, the more an interview is structured, the more it will be shaped by the investigator's pre-understandings and assumptions, and the less able she will be to access participants' perspectives. Furthermore, as Denzin points out (Denzin 1989: 123), highly standardised interviews build on an assumption that the questions asked might be equally meaningful for all the interviewees, a premise which does not correspond to the epistemological perspective adopted in this research. Differently from highly standardised approaches, semi-structured interviews allow for more flexibility in the wording of the questions and can include a mix of more or less structured questions.

The outline of my semi-structured interviews started with a few standard items concerning basic personal information and continued with a set of questions related to issues young people were invited to explore. I frequently varied the order and wording of the questions and sometimes omitted items that had been spontaneously covered during a previous answer. In addition to this, during each interview I introduced further questions or short comments to stimulate the respondents to explore single aspects of their answers, allow fresh insights to emerge, or open a new perspective (Merriam 1998: 74-75). This form of interaction tended to shape the interview

as a conversation and a cooperative effort, in which I tested my pre-understandings while at the same time providing the space for interviewees to develop their individual perspective.

As mentioned above, the typical youth programme offered by the Taizé Community consists of a weekly retreat. Life at Taizé follows a weekly pace, and each Sunday is characterised by departures and arrivals of new groups. The length of my participation in each youth pilgrimage as an observer was thus predefined; interviews were planned towards the end of the group's stay at Taizé to allow me to observe young people, to build rapport with them, and to progress in my insider role.

After a pilot experience with the first youth group, I performed eight interviews with young people involved in the second pilgrimage (Summer 2010). This group was composed of a significant percentage of underage participants. Of the ten young people belonging to my chosen age target (eighteen to thirty-five), eight accepted to be interviewed. Together with my field notes as participant observer, these interviews constituted the basis for the analysis reported in Chapter Four.

The interviews lasted, on average, between forty-five minutes to an hour, depending on the interviewee's willingness to share. Young people were, in general, extremely open and cooperative, and most interviews lasted an hour. After a few standard questions about their current occupation and religious background, the interview process gradually tried to create an informal atmosphere to lead the interviewee to the core of the conversation. This included more open-ended questions concerning the motivations bringing them to Taizé and the meanings they attributed to their experience there. Each interview was based on the same outline, but I varied the wording and the sequence depending on the way the interaction with the interviewee developed. I also frequently introduced further questions and probes to allow the interviewee to better develop interesting elements emerging from the conversation. Furthermore, when a new interview provided fresh insights or revealed apparently converging patterns, I slightly varied the outline to explore a possible new idea or hypothesis.

All these interviews were rich and interesting. Through them I was able to explore dimensions of young people's experience I had been unable to observe previously, due to the limitations imposed on my role as participant observer during the first pilgrimage. The fact that I was a student created a form of solidarity and connection with many members of the group, who were students themselves and had sometimes been involved in research, as well. The decision to wait until gaining rapport and being accepted as a member of the youth group proved to be

positive, as it improved the quality of the interaction and encouraged openness and trust. In several cases the interviewees thanked me for the opportunity of being interviewed, as through the process they had been stimulated to reflect on their experience and 'to make sense of it'. By the end of our visit to Taizé, many of them jokingly expressed their disappointment for the conditions of confidentiality and anonymity under which they had participated in the study: 'Why on earth should our names be kept confidential? We want to be mentioned in your research!'

## **2.7 Access and field relations**

As previously mentioned in this chapter, the Taizé Community website includes a specific section with a regularly updated list of British groups scheduled to visit the site in the coming months (Taizé 2009b). Youth groups usually visit the Community at fixed times of the year, during Easter or, more frequently, in the summer. Groups organised by larger or multiple dioceses can vary in size from about ten to twenty-five participants, on average. According to the lists provided in the website, most British groups organise their pilgrimages to Taizé between the second half of July and the first half of August. Consequently, I contacted by e-mail all the leaders of youth groups expected to visit the Community during that month.

As gatekeepers, group leaders received a specifically designed information sheet in which I briefly introduced myself and my research, explained its objectives and methodology, and detailed the ethical policy adopted to protect informants. Over two years I contacted eighteen gatekeepers; four of them preliminarily agreed to be involved in my project. Two of these leaders organised youth pilgrimages taking place during the Summer 2009. The first was a vicar motivated by a strong personal commitment to Taizé. She had visited the Community every year for three decades, from a very young age, and welcomed the opportunity to contribute to a study on young people's views on Taizé. After a few exchanges in which I further clarified the nature of my project and asked for more information about the characteristics of the group, she sent me an application form to be registered as a participant.

The second leader who replied positively also showed great enthusiasm for the project. After a consultation with her bishop, she confirmed her willingness to support the research and even offered me the possibility of receiving a financial contribution provided by the diocese, depending on my age (all young people under twenty-nine involved in that group received a similar contribution). I refused the offer both for age and ethical reasons. The group leader also

required further information about my methodology and particularly about participant observation. We had several exchanges by e-mail during which I provided detailed explanations about the methodology. This seemed to satisfy her requests. She suggested immediately distributing an advertisement sheet with information about the project to start promoting it among the group and to prepare for the recruitment of volunteers for the interviews. I sent her the documents I had prepared for this purpose and asked her to provide comments and feedback about it. Her reaction was very positive, and she immediately sent the files by e-mail to all participants.

In both the first and the second case, I noticed that group leaders tended to keep in contact with their young people essentially through e-mail. In the case of the first group, I later discovered this was due to the fact that participants had been recruited through personal contacts or different parish and school networks and were thus scattered in different places. They did not belong to a single group meeting outside the opportunity provided by this organised trip. As a consequence, the first group never physically met before the trip. The case of the second group was different. The diocese was seeking to relaunch occasional Taizé liturgies at a local level. In agreement with the Bishop, the youth leader planned to transform them from irregular, parish-based worship services into a regular, diocese-led programme. At the time of my contacts with the group leader, they were planning the transition, and the trip to Taizé was part of their strategy. Differently from the first group, some of their young people participated in these irregular Taizé prayers and were able to have a preparatory meeting before leaving for Taizé. After having been informed about my methodology, the group leader told me by e-mail that during that meeting she was going to discuss my participation with the members of the youth group and involve them in the decision. I was invited to meet the group and personally introduce the project once at Taizé, but for this preliminary gathering the group leader decided to deal with the issue of my participation in my absence. After the meeting, the leader announced that the group was happy to get involved and all the members had agreed to be interviewed.

I travelled to Taizé with the first youth group but met the second during the journey, which took about fifteen hours. Once we arrived at the Community, I had some further exchanges with the second group leader, from which I understood that she had underestimated the role of participant observation in my research; in her understanding, my goal was essentially to interview her young people. She expressed a clear reluctance to have me as a participant and observer of the life of the group. The conversation surprised me, as this leader was also the one



who had asked for extended explanations about the nature of participant observation. Eventually, as participant observation was an essential part of my research design and the gatekeeper was clearly reluctant to allow my participation in the group's activities, I decided to focus my attention exclusively on the first group.

As mentioned above, the leader of the first group was an Anglican vicar. She was in charge of a medium-sized parish close to a college, which had university students among its attendees. She was also strongly involved in working with school and community projects, particularly targeting an urban area with high rates of different forms of abuse. She had brought with her two relatives and a friend, and from the beginning was very cooperative and included me in her circle of relations at Taizé. During our stay, she seemed to progressively develop a growing attitude of trust in me. We often had conversations, which helped me discover the background and nature of her relationship with Taizé. These dialogues were extremely helpful, as they contributed to highlight some of the dynamics underlying the promotion of Taizé among the younger generations.<sup>66</sup> After a very brief introduction at the departure by coach from London, she left me free to manage my relationship with her youth group, with some restrictions, while initially observing me from a distance. As the days went by, she became increasingly trusting and progressively opened herself up in our conversations. She emphasised the value of 'letting young people be free' and not interfering with their experience at Taizé. As a leader, she adopted a detached attitude and kept in contact with young people at fixed times of the day (during one of the meals, in the evening, or in the recreational space provided by the Community), while she participated in the adult programme. In fact, she enjoyed her time at Taizé as an opportunity for spiritual refreshment.

To encourage her trust and gradually build rapport with the group, I initially adopted a laid-back attitude by showing my willingness to participate in the life and activities of the group, while at the same time demonstrating by my behaviour that I respected its dynamics and internal relationships. Therefore, particularly during the first days of our visit to Taizé, I tried to be as unobtrusive and discreet as I could. I progressively approached the circle constituted by the youth group until I was accepted as one of its members. Considering the age-based organisation adopted at Taizé and the main focus of my research, I intentionally tried to build

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<sup>66</sup> One positive consequence of the limitations imposed by the age segregation at Taizé was that, through my participation in the adult activities, I met several group leaders from the UK and other parts of the world. In my informal conversations with them, I discovered that the majority had been attending the Community for many years. As youth, a significant number of them had participated in pilgrimages to Taizé organised by clergy whose first contacts with the Community went back to the second half of the sixties or the beginning of the seventies.

my profile as similar to that of the young people and distinct from that of the leader and the adults in the group. By the end of the visit, I felt that I had been fully accepted in the youth circle; we decided to keep in contact through Facebook—a practice they used to continue exchanging, as many of them they did not have regular opportunities to meet outside Taizé—and they asked for my profile details so that they could share photos and comments and I could keep them updated on the progress of my research.

The following year, I contacted the leaders in charge of pilgrimages taking place during the summer of 2010. I received multiple refusals, due to gatekeepers' unwillingness to include a researcher in their youth group. In a few cases, leaders willing—in principle—to support my project had to cancel their trip due to low participation. Eventually, two group leaders accepted me as participant. They were in charge of pilgrimages taking place during two consecutive weeks. Both of them had a long familiarity with the Community, which they had started visiting as young people, and both organised regular Taizé liturgies in their local communities. However, as mentioned earlier, due to the Community's regulations concerning the length and frequency of adults' stay at Taizé, I had to cancel my participation in the smaller of these pilgrimages. The vicar in charge of its organisation was very supportive of my research and tried to intercede with the Taizé Brothers, highlighting the importance of exploring young people's experiences, but the Community confirmed its position and denied permission for a second week's stay.

The larger group, which I decided to follow, was jointly organised by two important Anglican dioceses and coordinated by four clergy. The main leader had visited Taizé for almost two decades. The Community held a particular significance for him, as he considered his pilgrimage experiences as having had a major influence on his decision to embrace the ministry. In his view, a research project on young people's experience at Taizé was urgent and necessary, and he enthusiastically supported my proposal. A letter with my picture and a presentation of my project was sent to all registered young people, who were consulted about the possibility of my participation. The leaders received no objections. The implications of my presence and the nature of my project were further discussed by the leaders during a preparatory meeting with the participants, in my absence. By the time of my departure, young people were well informed about who I was and generally keen to cooperate. Furthermore, the entire leadership team was not only favourable to my project, but also actively committed to support my work, both in organisational terms and with their youth. During the journey to Taizé, the leaders approached

me to provide further background on their youth groups, parishes, and ministry, to talk about their views of Taizé, or to ask further questions about the significance and aims of my research. During these conversations, I became aware of the fact that for some smaller parishes these youth pilgrimages were the only youth oriented activity provided during an ecclesial year, sometimes with no further follow-up at the local level.

Upon arrival at Taizé, it became evident that the leadership team was very intentional about trying to create a cohesive group. Differently from my previous pilgrimage, leaders and young people shared the same camping space. Leaders spent time introducing each member and strongly encouraged young people to not isolate themselves, to care for each other, and to be attentive to other participants' possible problems. They also suggested meeting at mealtime in a designated space; this became a habit for all the members of the group throughout the week. These intentional efforts to create unity significantly facilitated my task, along with the clear and explicit trust I enjoyed from the leaders. As a result, building rapport with the young people was a much easier and quicker process than in my previous experience. Being younger than the vicar in charge of my 2009 group, the leaders of this group were also able to attend young people's daily programmes and invited me to do the same. To facilitate my full integration in the group, they provided me with youth meal tickets, which allowed me to consume my meals with the youth group, as they did. To prevent any problems with the Community, I was introduced as a 'contact person' (in Taizé's language, a person working as liaison between a small group and the Community's organisation), and therefore not subject to the rules of a normal adult visitor. This was a significant help both in setting a positive and supportive climate for my research and in minimising organisational obstacles. At the end of our stay, my relationship with the leaders of the group was so strong that the main coordinator offered to provide references for me with other pilgrimage leaders, as in his view my presence had been positive for his youth group.

## **2.8 Research ethics**

In the previous paragraphs, I outlined how participants' recruitment and the data collection were organised. As gatekeepers, all the group leaders I contacted received an information sheet by which I explained the nature and objectives of my research, the research methods involved, and their implications for the participants. The information sheet also included explanations about how I intended to ensure informed consent, young people's right to withdraw at any stage, and

the protection of the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. At the end of the information sheet, I invited gatekeepers to ask further questions, either directly to me or through an Internet blog, which I had designed so that leaders and participants could have access to further information, ask questions, or provide feedback. All gatekeepers also received a copy of the advertisement letter I had designed to recruit informants.

Furthermore, before their departure all youth received an e-mail advertisement letter in which I explained the focus and goals of my research, the methods adopted, and the practical implications of participating in the research. The letter also highlighted their right to withdraw and the anonymity and confidentiality of the data they provided. To facilitate further questions, the advertisement letter included my contact data and the address of the Internet blog. In addition to this information, during the pilgrimage I provided further oral explanations about the implications of my research for matters of personal privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality and took time to answer young people's questions. As a participant observer, whenever I recorded specific comments or excerpts of conversation, I asked young people for their permission and made clear they were completely free to refuse.

Before starting any interview, I took the time to inform participants about their right to change or withdraw part or all of their statements, either during or after the interview, up until a year after its release. I also explained how the anonymity and confidentiality of the data was going to be protected. This involved developing a coded system to replace their names, keeping the data concerning their identity in an external, password-protected drive of my computer, and modifying all information that could potentially identify them. Furthermore, young people were informed that their data would be stored in two separate places: one copy was going to be saved in an external hard drive in my home, not accessible to anyone else; a second copy was going to be kept in a secure place at King's College for seven years. These details were explained orally and then presented in writing as part of the informed consent sheet young people had to sign before starting the interview. Before signing the sheet, young people were invited to ask further questions. The form was signed in duplicate both by me and by the interviewee, who kept one of the two copies.

## **Chapter 3 - Taizé's ecumenical vocation and the 'adventure with the young' in Brother Roger's theology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

As anticipated in the methodology, this chapter will focus on further clarifying the context of Taizé's youth pilgrimages by providing a critical overview of the theology underlying the Community's ministry practice with young people. This is a particularly important task in light of the objective of this thesis (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94), which seeks to highlight the competing theological interpretations at play in the arena of Taizé's youth pilgrimages. To fulfil this goal, the chapter will provide a reconstruction of the theology embedded in the Community's mediation. These theological meanings will constitute the background against which I will analyse young people's interpretations of their pilgrimage experience (Chapters Four to Six). The chapter will proceed by first trying to situate Brother Roger's thought within the theological landscape of his time. Thus, in the first part of the chapter, I will discuss some challenges involved in identifying the theological influences interacting with his thinking. The following section will situate Roger Schutz's thought within the landscape of the contemporary Swiss and French theological debate and will explore the foundational sources from which his theology took shape. Following this introductory part, I will then proceed by identifying the soteriological core of Brother Roger's theology, whose axis is constituted by Christ's prayer for unity contained in the Gospel of John 17.21. Starting from this foundation, I will reconstruct Roger Schutz's view of the Church (ecclesiology) and its mission (missiology). As these aspects of his thought are closely interconnected, they will be analysed in the same section. After having delineated the general horizon of Brother Roger's theology, I will identify the role of the young generations and of the Community's ministry within it. During this exploration, particular attention will be given to highlighting the connections between Roger Schutz's theological thought and its mediated expressions in the practice of the Taizé Community.

In my survey of the literature (Chapter One), I emphasised how any reconstruction of Taizé's foundational theological framework needs to be based on a study of the works written by its founder, Brother Roger. However, before starting my study of his theology, a few preliminary remarks are necessary to introduce some key features of his writings. These are characterised by a recurrent tendency to not provide specific references to contexts, influences, and sources that may have shaped his theological thinking. This neglect implies that reconstructing his

theological background is often a challenging task. The founder of Taizé tended to connect the development of his thinking more to concrete experiences, encounters and relationships than to his exposure to theological ideas and debates.<sup>67</sup> Thus, for instance, while throughout his life he often evoked the influence of his early family experiences in shaping his ecumenical thought and his approach to the ministry to young people (Schutz 1982a: 75; 1973: 37-38; 2005: 53; 1985: 32; 1970b: 52), he remained virtually silent on the significance of the years spent as a student at the Faculté Libre de Théologie of Lausanne and at the Faculté de Théologie Protestante of Strasbourg. Despite this silence, his works show that those years played a crucial role in his theological maturation. It is, in fact, at that time that Brother Roger clarified his early intuitions and built a theological foundation for his project of community. As highlighted by recent historiographical research, this important process of clarification can only be understood as a result of Roger Schutz's readings, experiences, contacts, and exchanges as a student (Scatena 2011: 17-99; Chiron 2008: 42-54). In a similar way, contemporary scholarship has evidenced the long and influential connection between the Abbé Paul Couturier, father of French spiritual ecumenism and founder of the *Groupe des Dombes*, and Brother Roger (Scatena 2011: 70-99; Chiron 1989: 64-65, 67-68). Nevertheless, neither the Abbé nor the *Dombes* meetings, in which the Prior of Taizé participated alongside prominent Church leaders and theologians (Scatena 2011: 96; Clifford 2005: 105-18), are ever explicitly mentioned in his books. This issue is particularly problematic, as due to the absence of archives Brother Roger's interviews and writings constitute an essential source for understanding the theology underlying the Community's ministry.

In a recent thesis, Sanders Gower similarly highlights Brother Roger's reticence to provide information about the influences orienting his theological thought (Sanders Gower 2010: 25). In her view, this attitude could be motivated by ecumenical caution in an attempt to avoid '*every word that could slow the process of reconciliation*' (Sanders Gower 2010: 26). Sanders Gower's analysis only concerns Brother Roger's early works, whose study is the object of her thesis; however, even in this case the explanation seems to overlook Roger Schutz's frequent and severe judgements concerning institutional Churches and their leaders, described as isolated in a spiritual ghetto, hierarchically rigid, authoritarian, paralysed by their traditions, inclined to

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<sup>67</sup> This insight is confirmed by Scatena's study, according to which the development of Brother Roger's thought '*sarebbe stato spesso scandito da incontri personali nei quali la dimensione empatico-affettiva ha sempre giocato un ruolo molto importante*' (Scatena 2011: 74). Translation: '*Was marked by personal encounters in which a very important role was played by empathy and affection*'.

spiritual compromising, and missionally ineffective (Schutz 1943: 196-97, 206-08, 19; 1944: 15-16, 20-22, 30-31, 33, 52-53, 64-65, 66-67, 71). Similar assessments of contemporary ecumenical and ecclesial institutions, often specifically addressing the Protestant tradition, are also a recurring theme in Brother Roger's later thought (Schutz 1961: 11-14, 32; 1962b: 14, 52, 56-58, 68-76; Roger 1969: 9, 15, 19-20, 21-23, 38, 39, 42-44, 67). Furthermore, the founder of Taizé was not afraid to take controversial positions on divisive ecumenical themes, such as the celibacy of priests or the leadership and authority of the Roman Catholic pontiff.<sup>68</sup>

I would argue, rather, that Brother Roger's silence on matters concerning the theological influences underlying his thought should be attributed to a different set of reasons. As noted in my overview of the Community's history, the first Prior of Taizé never intended to study theology or become a pastor. Instead, he felt called to study literature and become a novelist, a career path that his father—a pastor and the child of Protestant pastors himself—strongly opposed (Gonzalez-Balado 1977: 29, 36-37; Chiron 2008: 13-20, 42-43; Scatena 2011: 21-27; Brico 1982: 14; Escaffit and Rasiwala 2008: 17; Spink 2005: 20-25). For young Roger, who resented the stern religiosity of his family's tradition and his father's authoritarian attitude, literature represented a way to come to exist as an autonomous individual and leave behind a past of solitude, misunderstandings, and humiliations<sup>69</sup> (Scatena 2011: 21-27; Chiron 2008: 34-35, 37-39; Feldmann 2007: 19-20; Spink 2005: 19-20, 20-25). In an unpublished writing dated June 1948, well after the end of his theological studies and the publication of his first works, the young Prior of Taizé confessed his lack of interest for theology: '*Je n'ai jamais aimé la théologie*'<sup>70</sup> (Scatena 2011: 33). Furthermore, both Scatena and Chiron emphasise that during Brother Roger's years as a student his primary concern was to find a purpose for his studies and a sense of direction for his struggling faith (Scatena 2011: 37; Chiron 2008: 44-52). In this context, his real achievement consisted in overcoming the inheritance of solitude from his difficult adolescence (Scatena 2011: 33-40). This development resulted from the realisation that, like him, other theology students shared his struggle with a faith choice passively inherited

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<sup>68</sup> In 1949 the Community, under Brother Roger's leadership, decided to introduce a vow of lifelong celibacy as part of the conditions to be admitted as a member, a decision which favourably impressed pope Pius XII but created strong reactions from the Protestant side that considered it as incompatible with the biblical teaching (Chiron 2008: 105, 23-26, 41-42). Furthermore, when in 1971 the Catholic Church was facing a decrease of priestly vocations, and part of the Catholic clergy was asking to open a debate on the subject of celibacy, Brother Roger defended the tradition linking celibacy and priesthood, and supported Paul VI's refusal to reconsider this commitment (Chiron 2008: 262). A further example of this attitude is given by Schutz's proposal to reunite Christianity in the form of a confederation of Churches led by the Roman Catholic pontiff as '*pasteur des pasteurs*', a vision whose divisive impact he fully appreciated (Schutz and Taizé 1965: 16, 134; Schutz 1971b: 129-30).

<sup>69</sup> Scatena points out that Roger Schutz's father did not consider him intellectually gifted and had initially planned to train him as an agricultural worker in his brother's farm (Scatena 2011: 22).

<sup>70</sup> Translation: '*I have never loved theology*'.

from their families. Many felt a similar uncertainty concerning a future parish ministry career, which they perceived as solitary and alienating, and sought to find the earthly, human significance of their studies, *'la presence du monde à nos études'*<sup>71</sup> (Scatena 2011: 34). These experiences stimulated Roger Schutz to envision a way to realise his early intuitions concerning the transformative spiritual impact of community life. This explains why, during his years as a student, Roger Schutz became progressively more involved as a spiritual leader in the university's Christian student association, to the point that this self-perceived calling took priority over his studies (Scatena 2011: 37, 54). This also explains why, once appointed as editor-in-chief of his Faculty's student magazine *Sous les cèdres*, he focused its activity on themes related to students' spiritual formation, against the advice of those who would have liked him to concentrate on contemporary theological debates (Scatena 2011: 39). In my opinion, this foundational perspective can help to explain a tendency that characterises his writings, which consistently tend to marginalise the importance of theological discussions (Schutz 1961: 28; Roger 1969: 9, 42). As I will show in this chapter, Roger Schutz conceived faith in existential, relational, and experiential terms, as an individual and communal inner journey shaped by personal encounters and concrete experiences. This vision was oriented by a dominant missionary concern, as he considered a radical commitment to make Christ's love concretely present in the world the only credible test of faith. His writings tend to reflect this dual focus: ecumenical and missionary—expressed in a continuous emphasis on the urgency for Christians to break their isolation and be concretely present in the world; spiritual—often expressed in narrative or poetic forms as a way of sharing his inner spiritual journey through the concreteness of everyday experiences, travels, and personal encounters, all interpreted as revelatory of God's dialogue with his soul. This perspective clarifies the meaning of Brother Roger's later confession to Kathryn Spink, with whom he admitted to find *'impossible to discern which people, events or circumstances are really influential'* (Spink 2005: 14).

The framework I have just described implies that any analysis of the sources and influences of Brother Roger's thought is necessarily limited and at least partly tentative. Nevertheless, it is still possible to reconstruct the theological context from which his reflection progressively emerged. This will be the objective of the next section.

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<sup>71</sup> Translation: *'The presence of the world in our studies'*.



### 3.2 Theological context and influences

The context reconstructed in the introduction to this chapter provides a useful framework to understand the issues surrounding the study of the sources of Brother Roger's theology. In this section, I will explore the formative context within which his reflection took its fundamental shape. Given the focus of this thesis, my reconstruction will be necessarily limited and, therefore, cannot be considered as exhaustive.

Throughout its development, Roger Schutz's thinking appears to be dominated by some foundational theological themes. In their basic shape, their emergence can be traced back to his first writings, which he penned during his studies (Schutz 1941, 1943, 1944). Young Roger started his theological education in 1936, only a few years before the Second World War, which dramatically intersected their trajectory (Chiron 2008: 42). The French Swiss Protestant landscape and the Faculté Libre de Théologie of Lausanne were dominated by the influence of liberal theology and by the echoes of the Réveil, a revivalist movement of Pietist and Moravian inspiration pioneered by foreign missionaries, which swept into both France and Switzerland in the early XIX century. Its purpose was to stimulate a revitalisation of Protestantism by a reawakening of individual faith, which was conceived as an affective connection between the believer and God. As a consequence, the Réveil emphasised the centrality of individual conversion, which implied an acceptance of the Gospel based on an experience of the heart more than on intellectual arguments. This involved a radical and visible change of conduct that needed to be concretely expressed in a spiritually committed life. Both the themes of conversion and spiritual and practical commitment significantly shape Brother Roger's theology, which also shares a similar scepticism for intellectual arguments. In its experiential and affective emphasis, the Réveil was influenced by Romanticism and Schleiermacher's theology, with their emphasis on the role of intuition (Encrevé 1986: 113-14; Hillerbrand 2004: 1965-66; Scatena 2011: 20). At the same time, however, the French and Swiss Réveil also advocated a coming back to the pure doctrine of the Reformers, an aspect only apparently conflicting with their subjective focus. The disciples of the Réveil were, in fact, scarcely interested in theology, and for them the way of the Reformers implied, above all, a practice and testimony of life. Their reading of the Protestant sources, including the Bible, was thus dominated by a subjective and practical emphasis. A similar orientation can also be discerned in Taizé's approach to the devotional study and liturgical use of biblical and early Christian texts. For these characteristics, the Réveil was

marked by a significant theological fragmentation and eclecticism (Encrevé 1986: 114-15). This high tolerance for theological diversity is also present in Brother Roger's thought and constitutes an essential mark of Taizé's ecumenical spirituality and ministry practice.

By the time Roger Schutz started his studies, the influence of the theology of the Réveil was still dominant both in France and French Switzerland. The Faculté Libre de Théologie of Lausanne, where he studied, was an heir of that tradition, although partly balanced by a stronger emphasis on the study of the Bible (Scatena 2011: 28; Chiron 2008: 42-45). Between the two World Wars, however, a growing discontent had spread among a new generation of students and young pastors, motivated by the theological weakness of the congregations influenced by the Réveil. During the years immediately preceding the Second World War, this concern was further exacerbated by the debates concerning the role of the Protestant Church in the contemporary political situation. Réveil theology, with its individual-centred affective and experiential emphasis, seemed ill equipped to provide a credible answer to the challenges of the time (Scatena 2011: 28). To respond to these tensions, starting from the 1930s, two theological currents developed. The first was neo-Calvinism, whose main Swiss representative was Jean de Saussure, pastor of the Church of Saint Pierre in Geneva and professor at the local Faculté de Théologie, one of the early supporters of Roger Schutz's project of community. Neo-Calvinism advocated a return to the study of Calvin's works and to the Scriptural foundations of divine revelation; more generally, it emphasised a re-centring of faith around the idea of God's transcendence (Scatena 2011: 29-30; Reymond 1985: 23-24, 57; McNeill and Calvin 1967: 429-32; Probst 1983). The movement led by de Saussure promoted a wave of theological renewal with significant liturgical implications for its emphasis on a more solid biblical and dogmatic structure for church liturgical and homiletic expressions. In French-speaking Switzerland, neo-Calvinism opened the way to a second important theological current inspired by Karl Barth's theology (from 1935 a professor in Basel, Switzerland), with which it presented some points of convergence (Scatena 2011: 29-30; Chiron 2008: 45-46; Reymond 1985: 23-24, 57; McNeill and Calvin 1967: 429-32; Probst 1983).

Faced with these debates, Roger Schutz distanced himself both from what he perceived as the excessive doctrinal rigidity of Barth's teaching and from the shallowness characterising some theological expressions of the Réveil (Scatena 2011: 30-33; Restropo 1975: 32). In an article written for the theology students' bulletin *Sous les cèdres*, of which he later became chief editor, Roger Schutz expressed his discomfort for the increasing polarisation of Protestant theology. In

his view, its only causes were language misunderstandings and an underlying unwillingness to work towards an even minimal form of agreement (Schutz 1937-1938; Scatena 2011: 33-34). Young Roger's main concern was his inner spiritual struggle to discern a meaning for his faith and an orientation for his future. This focus led him to distance himself from the arena of contemporary theological debate to look for a third way. In my view, his attempt remained solidly grounded on the subjective and experiential foundations of the Réveil, whose limitations he sought to overcome through a more structured and disciplined approach to spirituality, a rediscovery of the communal dimension of faith, and a renewed focus on the role of the Scriptures as the source of God's revelation. The environment of the Faculté Libre de Théologie of Lausanne, while predominantly influenced by the theological heritage of the Réveil, was certainly open to these concerns.<sup>72</sup> Roger Schutz's professor of systematic and practical theology, Paul Laufer, defended the value of a disciplined spiritual approach. He exposed his students to the reading of Alexandre Vinet's<sup>73</sup> and Gaston Frommel's<sup>74</sup> works, both focusing on an introspective and psychologically oriented (in Frommel's case) form of spirituality whose influence can be seen at work in Brother Roger's theological activity. This formative

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<sup>72</sup> As editor of the student bulletin *Sous les cèdres*, Roger Schutz was attracted by René Guisan's thought. Dean of the Faculté Libre de Théologie of Lausanne until 1934 and professor of New Testament, Guisan left only a few articles and no published book. He was an expert in Schleiermacher's theology, on which he wrote an unfinished thesis. He also corresponded with Barth, and appreciated the spiritual significance of his work. However, he never became a follower of his theology, which he considered as implicitly authoritarian on doctrinal matters, and scarcely respectful of individuality. As a professor and dean, his most durable heritage consisted in a deep concern for the spiritual accompaniment of students, a lesson to which the young Roger dedicated close attention from the pages of the student bulletin he directed. For Guisan, in fact, community life was a solution to the deficit of the Church in contemporary society (Reymond 1985: 30-36; Scatena 2011: 36, 40-42). This missionary motivation was also central in Brother Roger's project of community.

<sup>73</sup> Defined by Barth as a faithful disciple of Schleiermacher, the Swiss theologian Alexandre Vinet was one of the leading figures of French-speaking Protestantism. From 1837 he was appointed professor of French literature and practical theology at the University of Lausanne. The heritage of his teaching was still significant in the late 1930s, when Roger Schutz was studying at Faculté Libre de Théologie of the same city. In Vinet's view, homiletics was a special form of rhetoric, whose task was to come in contact with an individual innermost being and speak to it. This inner dialogue presupposed an optimistic view of human nature, a subject on which he often quoted Barth: '*This innermost being in us is not evil but an advocate of the good, and it is the duty of Christian preaching to bring it to expression, so that during the sermon we are constantly reminded of our true selves*', (Barth 1991: 25-26; Old 1998: 6-8). In Vinet's view, the basis of preaching was a living document, Christ himself, and not necessarily the biblical text. Rather than weakening the theological foundation of a sermon, for Vinet this required a solid theological understanding. He was strongly critical of those preachers who used Scriptural quotes as a pretext to say whatever they wanted. The ultimate objective of a sermon was to form Christ in the hearer (Hancock 2013: 150-51). Roger Schutz's thought shows elements of contact with Vinet's introspective understanding of the role of worship as well as a similar anthropological optimism.

<sup>74</sup> Gaston Frommel, pastor and professor of systematic theology in Geneva from 1894 to 1906, was Vinet's closest follower. His work was characterised by an underlying psychological emphasis influenced by William James' thought on religious experience. For Frommel the objective of the Christian faith is creating an inner harmony between the individual and a greater spiritual order, an intimate communion that corresponds to human beings' deepest desire. In Frommel's view, however, this journey towards communion is made difficult by moral and psychological obstacles. Spirituality, and prayer in particular, are means to reorient our 'anarchic will' and redirect it towards the development of an intimate harmony with God's will. As I will show in the rest of this chapter, this psychological view of spirituality is also present in Roger Schutz's thought. In his view, in fact, spiritual life was a mean towards a deeper understanding of the self in relationship with God, through Christ. Its ultimate objective was to harmonise the individual's will with Christ's (Frommel 1908: 330-31; Izard 2009; Vidal 1994: 97-98).

environment also included the influence of theologians such as Edouard Burnier<sup>75</sup> and Frédéric Jaccard, author of scholarly works on Pascal and Port-Royal (Scatena 2011: 36).

Roger Schutz's interest for communal spirituality was part of a more general wave oriented to rebalance the individual emphasis of the Protestant tradition and shape a less atomised view of the Church (Rakoczy 2007; Schlumberger 1983; Bethge and Barnett 2000: 419-92; Biot 1961; Perchenet 1967; Scatena 2011: 38). As mentioned in the first chapter, the one contemporary communal experience that most influenced Brother Roger's reflection was Wilfred Monod's Third Order, *Les Veilleurs*. The founder of Taizé read Monod's autobiography and works, whose emphasis on lived religion (Chalamet 2013: 67) may have validated his rejection of abstract theological debates and his emphasis on practice. Inspired by his Methodist origins, with *Les Veilleurs* Monod had translated into a concrete expression the contemporary rise of interest for community life in French Protestantism. His objective was to break with a tradition of individualism he rejected, a goal with which Roger Schutz could immediately sympathise. The parallels between *Les Veilleurs* and Taizé are certainly numerous. Founded in 1923, after the First World War, *Les Veilleurs* aimed at enriching Protestant spirituality while at the same time contributing to the reconstruction of a peaceful Europe<sup>76</sup> (Scatena 2011: 46-47). A similar inspiration also motivated Brother Roger's project, whose birth was accelerated by his desire to work as a Christian witness amidst the tragedy of the Second World War. From the spirituality of *Les Veilleurs*, the founder of Taizé drew an underlying revivalist tension ultimately oriented to the spiritual and missionary revitalisation of the Church; through the mediation of this model he also inherited a Franciscan inspiration to simplicity, and the adoption of the Beatitudes as a basic inner rule that intentionally remained minimally elaborated, non-hierarchical, open and dynamic in its interpretation. Furthermore, Monod inspired Roger Schutz's integration of spirituality and Social Christianity, by which the French professor of practical theology had tried to balance his original Pietist inspiration. Influential in the development of Brother Roger's thought was also Monod's emphasis on the theme of the Kingdom. This was seen as a reality active over the centuries and progressively conquering the entire world through the conversion of individual souls (Monod 1901; Chalamet 2013: 66). Finally, it was from *Les Veilleurs* that

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<sup>75</sup> Professor of apologetics and contemporary theology at the Faculté Libre de Théologie of Lausanne when Roger Schutz was a student, Burnier was a reader of Barth, whose theology he critiqued for its inability to take into account the complexity of the role of human experience in Christian faith (Reymond 1985: 110-11; Scatena 2011: 36).

<sup>76</sup> In Chalamet's view, an essentially idealistic and optimistic view of human progress underlay Monod's emphasis on peace building and Social Christianity views (Chalamet 2013: 63; Monod 1903b: 541). This basic trust in the horizons opened by human progress is also a recurrent theme in Brother Roger's writings.

Brother Roger absorbed his early ecumenical focus,<sup>77</sup> although initially only as a marginal theme. At Taizé, as among *Les Veilleurs*, this ecumenical perspective found liturgical and devotional expression in the central role of the Bible and the tradition of an early, undivided Christianity (Scatena 2011: 46-47; Chalamet 2013: 63-69).

Other experiences of communal spirituality influencing Brother Roger included community life at the student house (called the Stiff) of the Faculté de Théologie Protestante of Strasbourg,<sup>78</sup> where he lived during the academic year 1938-1939<sup>79</sup> (Chiron 2008: 48-52; Scatena 2011: 50); the experiment of communal living started by Frank Duperrut<sup>80</sup> in Haute Savoie, not far from Taizé; his participation as delegate in the World Conference of Christian Youth<sup>81</sup> which took place in Amsterdam in 1939; and his contacts with the Swiss Community of Grandchamp,<sup>82</sup> a Protestant group whose spirituality was also inspired by the model of *Les Veilleurs* (Scatena 2011: 71-72; Chiron 1989). With Marguerite de Beaumont, founder of this female community, Roger Schutz shared the aspiration to renew the monastic tradition from a Protestant perspective (Scatena 2011: 72); it was also through her that he came in contact with the Abbé Paul Couturier.

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<sup>77</sup> As for Monod, in Brother Roger's view denominational fragmentation had a direct missionary impact. Believers needed to embrace Christianity's inclusive catholicity, which ultimately pointed out an essential brotherly connection between all human beings (Scatena 2011: 46-47; Monod 1903a: 104-06, 61-63).

<sup>78</sup> As noted both by Scatena and Chiron, the Stiff was not simply a student residence hall but an institution as old as the theology faculty itself, whose aim was the spiritual formation of theology students. It provided a model of structured communal spirituality, including daily communal worship and a collective study of the New Testament. Among the professors invited to read the New Testament with students was Oscar Cullmann, who taught at the Faculty until 1938 (Chiron 2008: 48-52; Scatena 2011: 50).

<sup>79</sup> During his studies in Strasbourg, Brother Roger was also exposed to the influence of Jean-Daniel Benoit, professor of practical theology at the Faculté Protestante de Théologie, whose work he cited in his dissertation. Benoit's work defended the biblical and theological legitimacy of spiritual formation within the framework of the Reformed theological tradition. His work was critical of hierarchical and authoritarian forms of spiritual direction typical of some Catholic traditions and emphasised an approach respectful of spiritual diversity as more coherent with the Reformed theological heritage. This model was also embraced by Roger Schutz in his dissertation, and was later reflected in the rule of the Community and, more generally, in his vision of communal life (Schutz 1943: 108; 1944, 1954; Scatena 2011: 50; Chiron 2008: 51).

<sup>80</sup> Mentioned by Roger Schutz in his dissertation and in his *Introduction à la vie communautaire* as a pioneer, Duperrut was a young professor of philosophy and psychology who taught at the Faculté Libre of Geneva. During the last decade of the XIX century, he founded a spiritual retreat house for young men between the ages of 18 and 25, in Haute Savoie. A follower of Vinet and Frommel, he tried to correct the Protestant tendency to spiritual individualism by providing young men with an opportunity to support each other, share common spiritual interests, and resist possible challenges. His model of communal spirituality included a simple and active life, communal Bible study, space for individual and communal meditation, and manual work. Implicit in this model was an emphasis on contemplative spirituality as a source of inner revelation and an inclination towards spiritual growth (Scatena 2011: 48; Schutz 1943: 114; 1944: 19; Duperrut, 1898). This structure and its general inspiration present parallels with Roger Schutz's later project of community.

<sup>81</sup> The significance of young Roger's participation in this event and of his subsequent exchanges with Suzanne de Dietrich, ecumenical leader and among the organisers of the gathering, has been emphasised by Sanders Gower in a recent thesis. The meeting represented Roger Schutz's first experience of a living, practical form of ecumenism with other young people in an international context. It also constituted a tangible—even if only temporary—realisation of the hope of Christian unity, whose significance was magnified by the threat of an imminent world war. The structure of this gathering, which included morning Bible study groups, communal worship, and afternoon workshops, may have provided a model for the development of Taizé's approach to ministry practice to young people (Sanders Gower 2010; Scatena 2011: 52-53).

<sup>82</sup> Brother Roger visited the Community of Grandchamp multiple times and regularly corresponded with its founder, Marguerite de Beaumont. As in the future Taizé Community, the spirituality of Grandchamp was based on biblically centred prayer, silence, communal worship, and disciplined spiritual practice (Scatena 2011: 69-73).

Couturier's influence in shaping the early ecumenical turn of the Taizé Community is confirmed by Brother Roger's own testimony<sup>83</sup> (Scatena 2011: 74; Schutz 1941, 1943, 1944). Roger Schutz's early family experiences had developed in him a strong sensibility to the subject of Christianity's divisions. This background and Monod's influence made him particularly receptive to the spiritual form of ecumenism supported by the Abbé Couturier<sup>84</sup> (Scatena 2011: 75). This can be considered as a third way between a vertical form of ecumenism (institutional ecumenism), expressed by theological debates involving religious leaders at different levels, and a horizontal ecumenism (practical ecumenism), prioritising living practice and concrete cooperation. Couturier's spiritual ecumenism could be situated at the crossing of these two axes, as it called believers to spiritually converge on the Christocentric foundation of the Church as a way of refocusing their efforts to overcome present divisions<sup>85</sup> (Cheza, christianisme, and Lebbe 2002: 357-58).

Brother Roger's indebtedness to Couturier's spiritual ecumenism can hardly be overstated, and constitutes, without a doubt, one of the most lasting and pervasive influences in his thought over the decades. This can be seen at work in numerous aspects of his reflection. From Couturier, Roger Schutz inherited the foundational Christocentric structure of his ecumenical thought, whose Scriptural axis was similarly constituted by Christ's priestly prayer (John 17.21). Furthermore, Couturier profoundly affected Brother Roger's understanding of the role of spirituality and psychology in ecumenical unity. The core of Couturier's spiritual ecumenism was represented by the conviction that believers should emulate Christ's prayer and be drawn to unity, not by trying to convert others to their ideas but by being drawn closer to Christ (Burke 2003; McLoughlin and Pinnock 2007: 107). Only by dwelling in Christ are believers enabled to see the truth, as intellectual exchanges are per se insufficient and need to be bathed in prayer

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<sup>83</sup> In his biography of Couturier, Maurice Villain quotes Brother Roger's testimony concerning the Abbé's influence on the development of the Community. Villain describes the friendship between Couturier, Roger Schutz, and Max Thurian and emphasises how the Brothers' participation in the ecumenical gatherings of the *Groupe des Dombes* resulted in their '*attachement irrésistible à la cause de l'oecuménisme*' (translation: '*irresistible involvement in the ecumenical cause*'). According to Villain, the Taizé Community perfectly embodied the insights Brother Roger had drawn from his contacts with the *Groupe Des Dombes* and the connected group *Eglise et Liturgie* (Villain and Latreille 1957: 180; Scatena 2011: 74).

<sup>84</sup> Couturier's ecumenical vision had a strong influence on the work of the Second Vatican Council (Clifford and Dombes 2010: 3), whose decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* integrated his spiritual emphasis on personal conversion: '*There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion. For it is from newness of attitudes of mind, from self-denial and unstinted love that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way. We should therefore pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity toward them*' (McLoughlin and Pinnock 2007: 122).

<sup>85</sup> In Couturier's view, the time of theologians had not yet come, as the present required purification and detachment through prayer and meditation. This preparation would avoid doctrinal confusion. Prayer did not imply obscuring the barriers between different denominations. Rather, it involved surrendering to Christ to spiritually reach out for the others, in all the independence and diversity of their traditions. Couturier described this spiritual attitude as '*survoler*' (fly over) (Burke 2003: 5-6; McLoughlin and Pinnock 2007: 116). While Brother Roger never uses this word, the essence of this spiritual attitude constitutes one of the core elements of his understanding of the ecumenical path to unity.

(Thiessen 2012: 92). As a consequence, unity depends on Christians' commitment to personal holiness. Believers need to engage in a journey of spiritual conversion from the divisive and sinful ways of the past. This process will progressively remove all obstacles through an increasingly intimate union with Christ.<sup>86</sup> Corporate change is thus rooted in individual transformation. Ecumenical progress can only come from this dynamic of conversion, contemplative prayer, and spiritual indwelling (Thiessen 2012: 92). Couturier's emphasis on spiritual conversion underlies a revivalist theme, and presents points of contact with Wilfred Monod's theology and the Réveil tradition, a heritage he shared with Brother Roger. This individual focus is also at the root of Couturier's attention to the psychological aspects of ecumenism. In his view, in fact, the solution to Christianity's fragmentation was primarily connected to believers' inner dispositions and to their overcoming fears and prejudices (Curtis 1964: 351). This psychological process of purification was made possible by becoming progressively closer to Christ and, therefore, being able to see each other through his eyes (Kinnamon 2003: 67). Couturier's emphasis on personal conversion had both ecumenical and missionary implications, which are also present in Brother Roger's thought. Renewal and purification involved a commitment to become Christ bearers and bring before the world a shining manifestation of Christ (Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold 1986: 543-44). The Abbé's individual-centred spirituality was partly balanced by his idea of the 'invisible monastery', a fellowship of Christians which would spiritually converge in regular prayer, Bible-centred meditation<sup>87</sup> and active commitment for unity (Burke 2003: 6; Villain and Latreille 1957: 333-35). Couturier's early interest in the Taizé Community was motivated by a desire to extend this invisible network by the inclusion of a first Protestant 'cell' (Scatena 2011: 70; Villain and Latreille 1957: 186-94). In his books Brother Roger never directly mentions Couturier's initiative; nevertheless, the idea of an ecumenical, 'invisible' mobilisation adds a supplementary layer of meaning to the Community's early adoption of Monod's Third Order structure, which evolved to take the current and more open form of a Pilgrimage of Trust. Couturier's ecclesiology, like Brother Roger's, is therefore suspended and in tension between a present of preparation and

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<sup>86</sup> Couturier's view of this spiritual journey is influenced by Pauline and Ignatian spirituality, and reflects a traditional tripartite spiritual progression including the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways (McLoughlin and Pinnock 2007: 119; Burke 2003: 2). While Brother Roger never uses this specific terminology in his books, his view of the spiritual journey to unity mirrors a similar progression.

<sup>87</sup> An important characteristic of Couturier's ecumenical vision was the conviction, also expressed in the foundational orientation of the debates of the *Groupe des Dombes*, that the Bible was to become the centre of any ecumenical search for unity. This emphasis is also evident in Brother Roger's frequent references to the Bible in his books and, above all, in the Community's liturgical expressions (Scatena 2011: 96).

active commitment and a future in which Christ, active and present in history, will eventually bring everyone to unity with him and reunite the Church.

In my view, Brother Roger's original achievement consisted in his translating this vision of spiritual unity into a language of symbols, rituals, and acts that—in the practice of the Taizé Community—incarnate and make visible, even if only ephemerally, the Church's ultimate reconciliation in Christ. In Couturier's thought, this vision underlay a fundamentally optimistic view of the future, influenced by Teilhard de Chardin's theology and particularly the reading of *Le milieu divin*, one of Couturier's favourite books (Burke 2003: 2; Teilhard de Chardin 1957). As in de Chardin's thought, in Couturier's theology there was no limit to the dominion of the Cosmic Christ, whose ultimate triumph consisted in bringing all his creatures to unity. History had a meaning and a direction of positive progress, as through its movement God tended to attract all to Christ. Therefore, ecumenical action for unity could not be restricted to Christian reconciliation but had to be oriented towards the creation of a universal brotherhood among all human beings, starting from the Church (Cheza, christianisme, and Lebbe 2002: 358; Burke 2003: 5). In this perspective, the task of the Catholic Church consisted in growing in holiness, inclusiveness, apostolicity, and universality (or, in Couturier's terms, in real '*catholicité*') to attract everybody within its communion, a vision later embraced by John XXIII through the reformatory work of the Second Vatican Council. This journey towards unity was the mystery Couturier believed to be at work in history:

*Le Mystère du cheminement qui nous mène du catholicisme appauvri de notre époque, déjà en passe d'un magnifique réveil, vers la plénitude du catholicisme renouvelé, où nos frères trouveront la plénitude de leurs désirs.*<sup>88</sup> (Villain and Latreille 1957: 286).

The Abbé often shared handwritten excerpts of de Chardin's *Le milieu divin*, which was published only later, among his friends (Burke 2003: 2). While it is unknown if he did the same during his long friendship with Roger Schutz, the thought of the founder of Taizé incorporates a similar optimistic emphasis, either directly from de Chardin's theology or possibly through Couturier. Thus, in his writings, Brother Roger recurrently expressed a foundational trust in humankind's positive movement towards progress and in Christ's active work in history, together with a faith in his ultimate triumph. Brother Roger's ecumenical vision also shared Couturier's universal scope and considered Christian reconciliation as a necessary condition for

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<sup>88</sup> Translation: '*The Mystery of a journey leading from the impoverished catholicism of our times, which would direly need a wonderful revival, to the fullness of a renewed catholicism which our brothers will find completely satisfying*'.



realising humankind's journey towards spiritual brotherhood and unity in Christ. As we will see below, however, despite his controversial suggestion of an ecumenical leadership of the pope as 'shepherd of shepherds' and president of a plural and reconciled Church, Roger Schutz distanced himself from Couturier and followed Monod in rejecting any idea of a return to the Catholic Church (Villain and Latreille 1957: 155).

As highlighted in the introduction, this overview of foundational theological sources underlying Brother Roger's thought cannot be considered as exhaustive. Rather, it is intended to provide a theological map to situate the foundational themes of Brother Roger's thought and his understanding of the Community's ministry to young people. These will be illustrated in the second part of this chapter.

### 3.3 Reuniting everyone to Christ: the Christocentric structure of Brother Roger's vision

The axis of Brother Roger's vision is represented by a core soteriological theme: Christ came to earth to overcome division and separation and to restore communion with human beings. The significance of this motif in his theology can hardly be overstated. It imparts to his thought a fundamental Christocentric movement towards bringing all humankind into unity with God through Christ. Around this theme, Schutz develops a vision whose essential vehicle is spirituality and whose horizon is ecumenical and missional. This Christocentric motif emerges very early in his reflection<sup>89</sup> and is summarised in the following quote:

*La communion en Jésus-Christ dans la charité, voilà un des fondements solides de la communauté chrétienne. Le principe même du péché est de diviser, d'opposer. Division de la conscience partagée entre la volonté de Dieu et sa propre volonté. Le péché divise, sépare, dissocie ce qui était primitivement unité, communion en Dieu. Cette œuvre de division est l'œuvre du diable (diabolos c'est-à-dire le diviseur). Le Christ est venu pour rassembler ce qui était dispersé, unir ce qui était séparé, afin que tous soient un en lui comme le Père et le Fils sont un. Et l'œuvre d'union, il l'a établie grâce à son Eglise par le lien de l'amour, de la charité.<sup>90</sup> (Schutz 1943: 158)*

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<sup>89</sup> Examples of the early emergence of this theme can be found in (Schutz 1943: 74, 76, 82, 158, 201-02; 1944: 15, 22, 28, 53, 59, 65, 75, 94-97, 99-101, 04; 1954: 8-12, 15, 16, 17, 31, 46, 54, 61, 64).

<sup>90</sup> My translation: 'Communion with Christ in charity: this is one of the firm foundations of Christian community. The very essence of sin is to separate and oppose. It is the splitting up of our consciousness, divided between God's will and our own will. Sin divides, separates, and dissociates what was united in the beginning, as communion in God. This work of division is operated by the devil (diabolos means divider). Christ came to gather together what was dispersed and separated, so that we all may be one in him as the Father and the Son are one. This work of unity has been entrusted to the Church through love and charity. With charity, which is the foundation of Christian life, we need for it to subsist a common ideal, an ideal incarnated not by individuals but by persons, not by an isolated "me" but by a "me" whose will is to be integrated into a "us".'

The passage presents numerous affinities with Couturier's ecumenical theology in its echoing of Christ's priestly prayer (John 17.21), in its focusing on the inner psychological roots of separation and conflict,<sup>91</sup> in its emphasis on the role of Christ as restorer of communion, and in its vision of the Church as founded on the essential mandate of continuing this work of unity through the living practice of Christ's love. In Roger Schutz's thought, this Christocentric theme works as a centripetal force giving structure, cohesiveness and a common trajectory to his thought throughout his life (Roger 2003: 49). The centrality of this mandate of communion implies that Brother Roger's theological reflection can be read as an effort to build a view of spirituality intended as a vehicle of unity. In this perspective, spiritual life is conceived as a journey towards progressive self-understanding and liberation from inner divisions. Its aim is to lead individuals to a new spiritual vitality and an increasingly intimate communion with Christ. However, this transformative process is not an end in itself, as its ultimate purpose is to prepare individuals to become active agents in the furthering of Christ's work of unity within the Church and in the world.

The long development of the Community, with its transition from an original focus on small ecumenical élites to grass roots youth involvement, implies that this core view of spirituality has been articulated with different emphases throughout time. In the earlier stages of his activity, Brother Roger conceived spiritual practice as a vehicle for committed Christians to revitalise an existing faith and embrace a radical ecumenical and missional calling. In more recent formulations, however, the focus of spirituality shifts to meet the needs of young people of variable levels of religious literacy and church commitment. The objective of spirituality thus becomes to spiritually awaken youth, so that they may gradually enter Christ's communion. In this framework, the invitation to be part of a mission of universal unity, while still central, can only be conceived as the final step of a journey whose starting point, Christian belief, can no longer be assumed. Spirituality becomes an exploration allowing individuals to understand the authentic meaning of their life, a path leading to Christ's discovery. Consistent with the psychological emphasis embedded in Brother Roger's thought, the obstacles on this journey of discovery are situated in individuals' inner self. Self-centredness, doubts, and hidden burdens of

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<sup>91</sup> The passage also suggests a spiritualised and psychologically oriented *amartiology*. The *diabolos* is seen as the separator, and divisions—declined as inner dis-integration, individualism, and fragmentation, in all their inner personal and relational implications—represent the polar opposite of Christ's communion-building work. The dualism communion-division closely parallels the ideas of faithfulness-unfaithfulness to Christ's mandate and represents a consistent motif in Schutz's theological thought.

guilt and pain are the source of inner divisions and separation from Christ and the others<sup>92</sup> (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 50; 1984: 10-11, 15). The response to people's recurring question '*How can I be myself?*' is found in becoming aware of the unique gift we possess in ourselves, which only God can bring to full development (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 41). Becoming aware of Christ's love and engaging in a relationship of intimate communion with him is the first step on this journey of healing and becoming that leads from self-centredness to Christ-centredness and opens the self to the presence of Christ, the Other (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 8-9, 62-63; 1984: 9-10; Roger 1981: 50). However, this process initially requires a descent into our inner contradictions, so that they may emerge to our awareness as obstacles and be removed. Such a transition needs to be accompanied by spiritual mentors, a ministry Brother Roger assigned to himself and other Brothers (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 36-37, 64-65, 76-78; 1984: 43). Consistent with Jean-Daniel Benoit's views on a Protestant approach to spiritual formation, this mentoring is conceived as strictly non-directive and non-hierarchical (Roger and Chisholm 1984: 79). The aim of the process is not to dwell indefinitely on self-centred analysis but, rather, to clear the ground for individuals to move on in their journey towards communion with Christ and discover their unique gift in the mission of leading others to the same path (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 65; 1984: 79).

In Brother Roger's thought, this idea of spirituality does not imply the absence of doubts and crises. In any individual, the unbeliever and the believer always coexist (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 49-50). Believers are vessels of clay and yet transfigured by Christ's radiant, transformative presence in them (Roger 1981: 38-39, 40, 50, 52; Roger and Chisholm 1984: 41-43). The necessity to remain anchored to the awareness of his presence implies that this spiritual journey needs to be sustained by contemplation, silence, and prayer, in a constant cycle of resurrections from darkness to light, which is symbolically reiterated as part of Taizé's youth pilgrimages in the weekly liturgical celebration of the Paschal mystery (Roger 1981: 18, 19, 41-42; Roger and Chisholm 1984: 93-95). Christ's presence in us is the guarantee that,

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<sup>92</sup> The ideas of guilt and sin rarely appear in Brother Roger's thought, and their definition remains always vague and underdeveloped. Guilt is considered as a product of oppressive social norms, aimed at forcing individuals into conformity. Sin is interpreted in light of the opposition communion/division, as separation from Christ and from the other. Salvation is intended as a process of personal liberation and psychological healing from inner wounds. Coming to God and being reconciled with him involves a process that, through listening and prayer, liberates individuals from the 'childhood wounds' that, often unconsciously, prevent them from trusting him. This healing process is seen as particularly relevant for young people, who can suffer from the consequences of humiliations inflicted during their childhood. Trusting Christ's loving presence and being listened to can open the way to freedom and forgiveness. This emphasis reflects the author's own difficult relationship with his father and his painful and solitary adolescence. Weakness and thorns are not denied, but the lifetime struggle to overcome them becomes a source of constant rebirth, creativity, and 'boldness' (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 36-37, 41, 63, 65, 69; 1984: 79, 83-85; Roger 1986: 12-13, 14, 32-33, 36-37; 2003: 19-20, 31-32, 36-39, 40; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 48).

even when only stammered in silence or expressed through a gesture of the body, our prayer is still communion with Christ, an expression of the heart's desire to be reunited to him (Roger 1981: 19-20; 1982: 55). However implicit and unconscious, this desire is a form of faith, as praying does not involve intelligence or logic capability but the inner and sometimes unconscious dimension of the heart (Roger 1981: 60).

In anthropological terms this spirituality relies on Brother Roger's conviction that all human beings carry within them a divine mark of their original unity with God, which was broken by the 'Separator', the Devil. This sign, God's image, persists in them as an unconscious desire of communion with God (Schutz 1962b: 17). This implies that every individual is naturally disposed to respond to God's invitation to live in communion with him through Christ and, therefore, is an implicit believer (Schutz 1962b: 17; Roger 2003: 8, 19-20; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: viii, 60; Roger 1986: 2-3, 27). The Community's mission consists in bringing to awareness this intimate longing, so that human beings may be reunited to God. This anthropology is connected to an epistemology emphasizing the role of intuition, perception, and the senses (Roger 2003: 10-12, 19-20; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 5, 6, 20, 78), together with that of a contemplative 'inward vision' (Roger 1986: 115), as essential vehicles of the Spirit's dialogue with human beings.<sup>93</sup> Without excluding the value of the intellect, this orientation highlights the radical inability of human reason to seize the mystery of God (Roger 1986: 115, 18; 2003: 11-12). This attitude of suspicion towards the intellect can also be read as an expression of Brother Roger's emphasis on a Gospel that breaks the privileges of the strong and powerful and belongs to the simple and the poor (Roger 2003: 11-12).

In spiritual and liturgical terms, the space where the dialogue between the Holy Spirit and this often unconscious longing takes place is prayer, which finds expression in silence, individual and communal worship, Bible study, and meditative singing. Especially in Brother Roger's last writings, silence is the most recurrently emphasised form of prayer, as it represents the closest expression to that often indistinct longing that, in his view, is already a form of faith (Roger 1986: 4, 25, 66-67; 2003: 51-52; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 5, 77, 122). The essence of individual prayer is defined as contemplative abandonment of body and mind to

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<sup>93</sup> In Brother Roger's theology the Holy Spirit has a fundamental role in the construction of the Church as a universal place of communion. It is through the Spirit that Christ is present in all human beings and can communicate with them (Roger 2003: 8, 10-11). Schutz's pneumatology is, therefore, intimately connected to his soteriology, as it is through the work of the Holy Spirit that individuals are reunited to God. The Spirit helps individuals through their inner darkness, leads them to trust Christ's presence in them, and supports their faith throughout a lifetime (Roger 1986: 4, 27; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 19).

Christ. This can be expressed in the repetition of a simple invocation, as in the Orthodox tradition (Roger 1986: 115), in the utterance of a single word and sometimes even in a poor stammering (Roger 1986: 25; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 77). Regardless of the form it takes, praying is always a sign of an expectant waiting of Christ (Roger 1986: 125; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 77). Following St Augustine, the Prior of Taizé considers prayer as a space where we open ourselves and express our thirst for Christ's presence, despite all our hesitations and contradictions (Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 74, 77). It is, above all, a place where surrender and trust can blossom and wounds can be healed (Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 16, 34, 61, 62-63, 73, 77). According to Brother Roger, it is this intimate search and longing that leads so many young people to visit Taizé (Roger 1986: 125; 2003: 51-52). This contemplative emphasis also involves a particular attention to the spiritual and liturgical role of figurative art and music, which he considers as a vehicle to discover the mystery of God. Music, in particular, shares with silence and inner prayer the ability to express what the human heart cannot say with words (Roger 1986: 95). Meditative singing has a similar function, although it is predominantly conceived as a corporate spiritual practice (Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 70).

In this context, corporate worship has a fundamental importance as a vehicle to seek and discover Christ's presence and explicitly involves a missionary dimension. Brother Roger conceives it as a space where contemporary individuals, oppressed by the anonymity of their everyday schedules, are enabled to explore their inner spiritual longings and access an invisible, supernatural reality. In this sense, Brother Roger considered the Orthodox model of liturgy as an important reference. The Community's worship is designed to provide a foretaste of Christ's transcendence, a break from the ordinary and the worldly, a temporary immersion in a liminal, alternative dimension where people can find what they are intimately lacking. In liturgical terms, for Brother Roger, this implies a rejection of reason-driven and secularising expressions, as they do not offer anything different from people's everyday reality. Rather, in his view, it is in the ancient tradition of the Church that individuals can find what they what they are looking for. Individuals' contemporary spiritual homelessness can experience in the ancient rituals and symbols of worship a sense of homecoming and an invitation to develop an implicit spiritual quest into the fullness of a Christian journey of faith and commitment. Therefore, worship should purposefully blend prayer, silence, repetitive singing, and visual symbols to create a universally accessible canopy, a space where individuals can discern the voice of the

Holy Spirit speaking to their innermost being.<sup>94</sup> It is especially in the corporate dimension, through the symbolic immersion in an all-embracing community of prayer, that the Spirit finds its way to contemporary human beings and helps them realise their spiritual oneness with God and each other (Schutz 1962b: 54-55, 75; Roger 1986: 66-67; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 69). The Prior of Taizé repeatedly emphasises the centrality of this vision of worship in the Community's ministry to young people, as in his view it is the lack of such spaces that leads today's young people to abandon their congregations:

*Depuis des longues années, avec mes frères, une question nous habite : pourquoi, en des vastes régions du monde, tant de jeunes vont-ils de moins en moins, ou même plus du tout, participer à la prière dans les églises ? Pourquoi certains disent-ils qu'ils s'ennuient quand ils assistent à une liturgie ? Si le Christ dans la communion de son Corps, son Eglise, n'était pas aussi délaissé, s'il n'y avait pas une telle absence de jeunes dans les églises, notre communauté n'aurait pas été stimulée à accueillir des jeunes pour qu'ils puissent prier, échanger, être écoutés... A Taizé ou lors de ces rencontres, nous découvrons que la beauté d'une prière commune chantée ensemble peut donner aux jeunes de laisser monter en eux le désir de Dieu, et aussi d'entrer dans la profondeur d'une attente contemplative.*<sup>95</sup> (Schutz 2001: 87).

In conclusion, Brother Roger's spirituality can be understood as a form of Christocentric asceticism. In his work, this term is used to define a disciplined, contemplatively oriented pursuit of a growing conformity to Christ, whose essential vehicle is a progressively more intimate communion with him (Schutz 1943: 101-22, 23-54). This ascetic spirituality, which contains implicit dualistic elements—as exemplified in Schutz's view of worship—needs to find concrete expression in a radical commitment to the fulfilment of Christ's mandate of universal unity. This imperative is translated into a specific horizon of action, which I will analyse in the next section.

### 3.4 Ecumenism and mission: building Christ's communion

The Christocentric theme of unity (Schutz 1943: 158) highlighted above as the pivot of Brother Roger's theology bears significant ecclesiological and missional implications. From an ecclesiological perspective, the Church receives its foundational constitution and mandate from

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<sup>94</sup> This idea of worship is connected to Brother Roger's theological anthropology and, more specifically, to the conviction that all human beings carry an inner image of God within themselves, a longing for their lost unity with the Father and, therefore, an implicit faith awaiting to be developed into its fullness. Consistent with Brother Roger's epistemological scepticism for the value of the sole intellect in matters of faith, worship is conceived as an emotional environment where the transcendent, symbolic taste of liturgical actions and expressions can evoke the feeling of a lost, supernatural home (Schutz 1962b: 54-55, 75).

<sup>95</sup> Translation: 'Some questions have been preoccupying my Brothers and myself for many years now: why do so many young people, in vast regions of the world, take part less and less in prayer in churches, or even not at all? Why do some say that they are bored when they attend a service of worship? If Christ was not being so deserted in the communion of his Body, his Church, if there was not such an absence of young people in the churches, our community would not have been stimulated to welcome the young so that they could pray, share, and be listened to... In Taizé or during these meetings, we have discovered that the beauty of a community prayer sung together can allow young people to let the desire for God well up in them, and also to enter into the depths of contemplative waiting' (Roger 2003: 51).

Christ, as it is entrusted with the continuation of his work of communion-building. This ecclesiological concept constitutes the pillar of Brother Roger's ecumenical thought.<sup>96</sup> This foundation implies a strong missional emphasis, as unity is at the same time the constitutive mandate of the body of Christ and its authenticating mark before the world.<sup>97</sup> In this sense the Church is never an end in itself. Its existence is legitimised only insofar as it motivates its believers to bring Christ to others and it provides a space where human beings can seek God (Roger 1981: 70). Therefore, the Church needs to be conceived as a sign of Christ's communion-building love, an open universal communion, a worldwide community of sharing (Roger 1981: 24). This understanding constitutes a critical counterpoint to the contradictory and introverted reality of historical churches. These need to undergo a radical process of reform and a Christ-centred spiritual conversion in order for them to recover their truly catholic nature. The urgency of this spiritual renewal is increased by the fact that history moves in a providential direction and towards the healing of divisions and injustices (Schutz 1970b: 105, 11-14). Christians need to join and influence this global movement without being left behind, as God's calling implies fighting courageously for the good of men (Schutz 1970b: 115). Believers need to become Christ bearing, radical witnesses in a society where God is already at work<sup>98</sup> (Roger 1969: 79; Schutz 1944: 69).

In the two decades following the Second Vatican Council, Brother Roger believed that Christianity's reconciliation would soon take place and actively worked to create the conditions for a spiritual revival, a new Pentecost leading to visible unity and renewed faithfulness.<sup>99</sup> In more recent times, however, the constant disappointment of these hopes led him to advocate

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<sup>96</sup> In Schutz's writings the centrality of this theme has a further, key functional role, in that it constitutes the ground on which he builds the ecclesiological legitimisation for the calling of the Taizé community. It is in the open gap between the imperative of radical faithfulness to Christ's mandate of communion-building and the contradictory reality of the Church as institution that the author finds the space to imagine his Community's mission—as a radical sign of unity, an agent of spiritual renewal, and a critique of institutional religion.

<sup>97</sup> This missional motif is often paired up with negative assessments of the Church as an institution, whose spiritual failure in incarnating Christ's mandate of ecumenical communion-building is responsible for its marginalisation and lack of credibility in contemporary society. Individualism, internal divisions, hierarchic rigidity, traditionalism, institutionalism, ghettoisation, and exclusivism all take root in the evil of division and are indicated as the cause of contemporary churches' missionary ineffectiveness.

<sup>98</sup> This view translates Brother Roger's fundamental optimism regarding the direction of history and human progress. 'Churchless' individuals are often considered as implicitly fulfilling Christ's mission of communion-building, which the Church has neglected. Thus, for instance, Roger Schutz considered the Communist defence of workers' rights as implicitly more coherent with God's imperatives of mutual love, unity, and solidarity than the self-centred faith of some Christian churches (Schutz 1961: 13; 1962b: 18-19). More generally, Roger Schutz's often read the 'unbelieving' world as a paradoxical pointer of God's direction in history.

<sup>99</sup> Thus, for instance, Brother Roger conceived the Youth Council as an 'event of God', a spark intended to provide the impulse for Christian Churches to start a process leading to visible unity. He believed that individuals' personal and corporate conversion was not sufficient to reform the Church; reconciliation ultimately depended on God's intervention. Christian unity would ultimately break out as part of a supernatural event, a 'new Pentecost' kindling all humanity with love (Roger 1969: 78-79). Roger Schutz's parallel with the early Church of the Acts is explicit, as his hope was that the new Pentecost would manifest God's desire for communion with all human beings and bring, at the same time, a divided Christianity to reconciliation and the unbeliever to faith (Roger 1969: 78-79; Schutz 1962b: 82-83).

an 'inner way' to unity, which involved a progressive spiritualisation and privatisation of his ecumenical vision (Roger 1986: 108). Divisions between ecclesial institutions could not prevent individual believers from realising an immediate, spiritual form of ecumenical reconciliation. Brother Roger's inner way to unity was conceived as the outcome of the Christ-centred process of conversion and transformation described in the previous section. Like Couturier, Brother Roger focuses on the inner and relational aspects of ecumenical reconciliation, whose realisation depends on individual transformation and convergence around a common centre, Christ. Accepting this inner way to unity represents a call for individuals to become active agents of a 'common creation' and transform the fragmented reality of their churches. This implies a focus on lived ecumenism and prophetic acts embodying reconciliation in everyday life. Every act of sharing, every encounter, weaves the threads of the spiritual robe of Christ, his reconciled Church (Roger 1981: 69). This emphasis on an actual practice of spiritual unity also implies that believers are to reconcile within themselves the rich diversity of Christianity's spiritual tradition: the emphasis on the centrality of the Bible typical of Protestantism, the rich contemplative heritage of the Orthodox Church, and the Catholic idea of Eucharist, with its focus on Christ's real presence (Roger 1986: 107-08). Brother Roger's idea of an inner way to unity constitutes the theological foundation underlying the eclectic variety of spiritual languages, symbols, and rituals made available to young people's subjective appropriation through the Community's mediation.

From an ecclesiological viewpoint, this focus on inner spiritual unity implies that, in Brother Roger's more recent thought, the contours of the universally open communion that is the Body of Christ are left undefined. While initially he unequivocally identified the Church as the community of the baptised, after the 1970s its boundaries become blurred. Roger Schutz' increasing emphasis on the universal presence of Christ in all human beings implies that, in his view, the Body of Christ includes virtually everyone, as the heart of God is as vast as humanity and cannot exclude anyone (Roger 1981: 13, 97). It is however possible, as some passages of his books would suggest, that while Brother Roger still implicitly recognised the Church as formally inclusive of all the baptised, his focus on the all-embracing nature of the Body of Christ ultimately implied that he had very little interest in emphasising its contours (Roger 1981: 70). The present counterpoint to Christianity's fragmented reality is constituted by the prophetic parable embodied by the Taizé Community, which is imagined at the same time as symbol and anticipation of a future reality and as a return to an ideal past, the faithful Church described in



Acts 4.32. By participating in Taizé's mediation of that parable, individuals contribute to temporarily re-enact the past while, at the same time, anticipating the reality of a spiritually reconciled, universal Church. In this sense, Brother Roger's ecclesiology integrates a restorationist motif.

In missional terms, this Christocentric foundation of the Church implies that believers should incarnate Christ's desire of communion with all human beings (Roger 1986: 7, 13, 38; 2003: 72-73; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 123). The spiritual process of personal transformation described above needs to be expressed in a coherent practice of life. This involves becoming bearers of Christ to others and, therefore, participants in the extending of his spiritual Church (Roger 1986: 7, 12-13; 2003: 22, 48, 69, 73; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 128). Brother Roger expresses this mandate as a radical invitation to self-giving (Roger 2003: 69, 76). Living for the other constitutes the highest form of self-fulfilment and the essence of true happiness (Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 4-5). Kind-heartedness and simplicity, virtues that echo a spirituality oriented by the spirit of the Beatitudes, are essential expressions of Christ's transformative presence in us and make us able to live in communion with the other (Roger 2003: 48, 72; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 3-4, 28). Christ's true disciples are agents of hope and healing; their mission involves extending God's love to others, sharing human suffering and brokenness, and being a ferment of reconciliation and peace (Roger 1986: 13, 38, 92-95; 2003: 73-74, 77; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 2, 5, 21, 32, 74). Brother Roger particularly emphasises the Paschal character of the Church, which should authentically and concretely participate in the agony of the oppressed and in their resurrection (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 74-76). This focus on justice, already present in Brother Roger's thought through the influence of Wilfred Monod's theology, becomes particularly prominent during the two decades following the Second Vatican Council, due to the combined influence of Catholic social teaching<sup>100</sup> and Latin American Catholicism<sup>101</sup> (Schutz

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<sup>100</sup> In some of his post-Vatican II works, Brother Roger's refers to Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and to pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* to emphasise themes such as world peace, non-violent political involvement, economic justice, commitment to social justice, and the role of young people as agents of change (Schutz 1983a: 43-44; John XXIII and Winstone 1963; Congar 1967).

<sup>101</sup> During the Second Vatican Council Brother Roger came in contact with progressive bishops Manuel Larrain and Helder Camara, leading figures in the early emergence of Liberation Theology and in the organisation of the Medellín Conference, in 1968 (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 31; Schutz 1962b: 42-43; 1983a: 6-7; Koschorke et al. 2007: 394-96; Pears 2010: 63-64; Smith 1991: 152). The influence of Latin American Catholicism oriented Brother Roger's decision to focus the Council of Youth not only on Christian reconciliation, but also on the construction of a Church that might be truly poor, missionary and 'Paschal', independent from political influences and committed to the liberation of the whole person and of people, in the spirit of Medellín (Smith 1991: 159-64). *Ta fête soit sans fin* (Schutz 1971b), *Lutte et contemplation* (Schutz 1973), and *Vivre l'inespéré* (Schutz 1976) contain evidences of Brother Roger's exchanges both with Latin American Catholic leaders and young people who had visited Taizé (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 12-13,

1983a, 1983b; Roger and Chisholm 1980). Christ's agony is manifested in the suffering of those who are persecuted under tyrannical regimes, tortured, imprisoned, exploited, and reduced to poverty (Roger 1981: 13-14, 25, 29, 44, 65, 90; Roger and Chisholm 1984: 34, 50-51, 90, 93-97). Their faces are a reflection of Christ's (Roger 1981: 50); the slums of the poor are new Golgothas built in the midst of a wealthy society (Roger 1981: 89). Consistent with his emphasis on the power of symbolic actions, his frequent pilgrimages with small groups of youth to the peripheries of the world are aimed at symbolically representing Christ's presence in the midst of suffering, as a sign of contradiction against the divisions and injustices of the world (Roger 1981: 80-81, 96-97; Roger and Chisholm 1984: 47-48, 50-51). This symbolic weaving of the Body of Christ, of which the poor and oppressed constitute the heart, represents well the essentially contemplative nature of Brother Roger's Paschal vision of the Church (Roger 1981: 80-81, 96-97; Roger and Chisholm 1984: 47-48, 50-51). Rejecting the Western idea of effectiveness and the necessity of practical, visible results, the founder of Taizé prioritised a contemplative 'being with' the poorest in Christ's presence (Roger 1981: 96-97). In his thought, these actions constituted a disruptive, prophetic anticipation of the Church to come. In terms of Taizé's liturgical practice, the intercessory prayer that follows the time of meditative silence during corporate worship embodies this contemplative 'being with' the suffering and oppressed. This emphasis is also reflected in the weekly programme of Taizé's youth retreats, which routinely includes workshops on solidarity themes and meetings in which young people share testimonies sometimes involving situations of poverty, war, and injustice.

However, starting from the second half of the 1980s, a significant change of tone occurs in Brother Roger's Paschal vision of the Church. Themes related to political oppression, especially connected to the situation of Latin American countries, progressively disappear. The emphasis on participation in the struggle of the poor and the persecuted is progressively spiritualised and privatised, while a greater space is dedicated to a general emphasis on world peace and economic justice (Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 82, 103-04, 12-13). Supporting these causes becomes part of Christians' commitment to build the Church as universal place of brotherhood.

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26-27, 51-52, 58; Schutz 1983a: 20, 52, 57, 75, 89). Among them Brother Roger also mentions some Christian revolutionaries (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 13, 54, 66; Schutz 1983b: 16, 32, 107).

Brother Roger's ascetic spirituality is the vehicle of this ecumenical and missional vision. As I will show in the next section, however, the Prior of Taizé believed that young people could play a pivotal role in its fulfilment, as partners in a 'common creation'.

### **3.5 Young people and the 'joint undertaking': the role of youth in Brother Roger's vision**

The theological project reconstructed in the previous sections provides the foundational framework to situate the role of the ministry to young people within the overall mission of the Taizé Community. Over the decades, the uninterrupted success of the relationship between this ecumenical institution and young people has attracted interest from those who have tried to isolate and reproduce a 'Taizé model' of youth ministry. Brother Roger consistently denied having ever developed a specific approach, strategy, or technique to reach young people (Roger 1986: 6, 33; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 92). This position finds further explanation in a passage of a lecture presented by Brother John, a member of the Community, during an international conference on the theme: *'Faith, Fear and Indifference: Constructing the Religious Identity of the Next Generation'* organised in 2004 by the University of Southern California. After having shared his *'apprehension'* (Brother John 2006: 147) for being invited to present Taizé's model of faith transmission, Brother John explained:

*Taizé's 'success' in attracting young people was not the result of an explicit plan of action, an agenda set out in advance: it was rather the response to their arrival and their aspirations in a way consonant with the life and the faith of the community. It was precisely because the adventure with the young was and is seen as meaningful by the brothers in terms of their own understanding of their vocation, that it could also be meaningful to the young visitors. These visitors did not have the impression that they were 'targets' of a conscious and intentional strategy. Instead, they were asked to take part in a joint undertaking that had meaning first of all for the brothers themselves. (Brother John 2006: 147)*

For Brother John the relationship between Taizé and young people should be understood as a development of its core vision, a *'joint undertaking'* involving youth as co-agents in the realisation of the Community's mission of universal reconciliation. Brother Roger's writings support this interpretation. In them, he describes the unsettlement caused to the Community by the increasing wave of young visitors and the process of progressive integration of this calling in Taizé's ecumenical and missionary vision. The Community's ministry to youth should, therefore, be interpreted as part of its broader commitment to realise Christ's communion building mandate.

Within this overall framework, however, young people are assigned specific characteristics and a unique role. At its most basic level, this uniqueness emerges from Brother Roger's consistent adoption of a dichotomic generational language opposing youth and adults. Young people are consistently associated with desirable spiritual qualities such as idealism, purity, generosity, spiritual renewal, and missionary dynamism, while adults are generally represented as spiritually disenchanted, self-centred, paralysed in their traditionalism, and disconnected from the contemporary world (Schutz 1961: 21; 1962b: 52). This characteristic of Brother Roger's language is also confirmed by Werckmeister's study on Taizé (Werckmeister 1993). While this negative emphasis on the adult generation tends to fade over the decades, with Roger Schutz's progressive ageing, this characterisation of the younger generations remains a dominant feature of his thought until the end of his life.

The theme of youth interacts with Brother Roger's theology at different levels. The first intersects his belief in a providential plan guiding history and his consequent, positive view of human progress. This conviction leads him to see contemporary society's movements as paradoxical pointers challenging the Church to reform itself in the sense of a greater faithfulness to its communion building mandate. The challenge of reaching contemporary young people constitutes one of most important prophetic pointers for the Church. Due to their rigid traditionalism, ecclesial institutions are disconnected from contemporary society; the younger generations, on the contrary, refuse to be limited by the past and emphasise the demands of the present. In Brother Roger's view, this paradox represents an implicit call for Christians to reject the idolatry of what is safe and follow the Gospel's radical emphasis on the provisional, open, and nomadic character of our earthly dwellings. From the younger generations comes an appeal to live and experience rather than to systematise (Schutz 1961: 21, 32). This requires the Church to stop its judgemental 'schoolmaster outlook' and become more open to all that is human and sometimes unsettling and uncontrollable. It also involves putting an end to ecclesial institutions' cultural elitism and tacit contempt for youth culture (Schutz 1961: 21; 1962b: 52). Rather, reaching contemporary, un-churched youth requires a focus on living as 'signs contradicting the world' and providing concrete examples rather than theoretical arguments (Schutz 1961: 21). The younger generations are sceptical of Christians' verbosity but eagerly look for radical life examples (Schutz 1962b: 52). Consistent with Brother Roger's emphasis on Christianity as a practice of holy, transformative living, his view of mission implies being radical witnesses of Christ's desire to reconcile all human beings to him. His rhetoric of stark binary

oppositions between young people, on the one side, and Christian institutions, on the other side, aims at building a case for the Church's need to change its language and attitude and recover a place of missional significance in the world of today (Schutz 1962b: 52).

This brings us to the second, and most important, level on which Brother Roger's overall theological vision intersects with the theme of youth. If at a societal level the challenge of reaching a sceptical new generation calls believers to Christ bearing living and corporate renewal, within the Church itself it is to the younger generations that Brother Roger assigns the mission of being the agents of a radical spiritual reform, builders of a reconciled Christianity (Schutz 1962a: 147-48). Christian young people are thus called to act from within their Churches to build a new climate and a 'large-hearted' collective ideal, a 'general vision' the world direly needs. In Brother Roger's view, it is the lack of this generous ideal that leads young people to become indifferent and ultimately to leave their churches (Schutz 1962b: 52-54, 81).

This emphasis on the leading role of the younger generations in the spiritual reform of the Church takes a central role in Roger Schutz's thought from the mid-1960s, when the Community starts attracting an increasing flow of young people. It is from this perspective that the organisation of a key event like the Youth Council needs to be read (Schutz 1983a: 16-17). This transition coincides with Brother Roger's shift from an ecumenical strategy principally aimed at winning support among the élites of the 'churchmen', which he considered as a failure, to a grass roots form of ecumenism aimed at mobilising young people to prepare a new Pentecost of the Church (Roger 1969: 8-9; Roger and Chisholm 1980: 72; Schutz 1983b: 17-18). This shift again finds expression in a generational and anti-institutional rhetoric. The young generations within the Church are the neglected recipient of a calling from the Holy Spirit, as they call ecclesial institutions to a 'second conversion' leading to unity and a new missionary relevance (Roger 1969: 11-12, 15-23, 20-21, 24-29, 30-40, 78-79). Their thirst for radical faithfulness exposes the blindness of the 'men of maturity', the current generation of Christian leaders, with their 'excessive security', their 'privileges', and their 'cleverness' (Roger 1969: 20). The ideal horizon of this spiritual reform of the Church is a return to its youth, to the original freshness of the Gospel as incarnated by the early Christian community described in Acts 4.32. Young people are called to live a Christ-centred communion with each other already in the present and thus become a transformative sign for the Church to become a brotherhood of all humankind (Roger 1969: 18, 20-21, 25; Schutz 1970b: 8, 11-19, 29-31, 66-70, 76-78, 88-89, 121-23, 33-40). The experience they temporarily live at Taizé, as part of its embodied

representation of Christian unity and evangelical freshness, represents the ideal which should inspire and energize their practical commitment beyond the 'high' moment of their pilgrimage to the Community (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 11, 72; Roger 1981: 18-20; Schutz 1983a: 17-18). However, starting from the late 1960s, Brother Roger's writings reveal his awareness that the Community had become an arena of competing interpretations. Young people's appropriation of their experience at Taizé often profoundly diverged from this ecumenical vision. Despite the sincerity of their spiritual search, many of the youth the founder of Taizé tried to involve in his attempt at reviving the Church had chosen to live their faith independently from institutions, and had replaced church involvement by a general ethical commitment to justice (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 11, 44, 55; Schutz 1983a: 48). Often indifferent, if not openly hostile, to the idea of ecclesial belonging, these young people seemed to have little interest in reforming their churches. Differently from Brother Roger's vision of a Christ-centred universal communion, their idea of brotherhood was this-life oriented, subjectively validated and authenticated by personal trust (Schutz 1983a: 47). Despite his awareness of a fundamental divergence between his ascetic vision of ecumenical and missional commitment and young people's aspirations, Brother Roger maintained an attitude of firm trust in the promise represented by the younger generations. This faith was founded on his belief in the sincerity of youth's spiritual quest that, in his view, represented a form of implicit belief waiting to be awakened. In this perspective, young people remained the key of Brother Roger's hope in the possibility of a 'common creation' of a different Church, the sign of a new 'springtime' of Christianity in a society where ecclesial institutions faced a deep crisis of credibility (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 10; Schutz 1983a: 16, 67; 1983b: 5, 79-80). Young people's often unsettling questions constituted a reminder of his own struggling faith as a youth (Schutz 1982b, 55, 57; 1983b: 77; Roger and Chisholm 1980: 16; Schutz 1983a: 43). In his commitment to listening and dialogue, Brother Roger often emphasised the authenticity of youth's search for Christ and their genuine aspiration to be meaningfully present at the heart of contemporary world's struggles and advancements (Schutz 1983a: 21, 60; 1983b: 11-12, 91). These elements constituted the foundation of his belief that the younger generations might play a key role in unsettling the Church, thus saving it from its irrelevance.

Even with the progressive weakening of his hope in a new Pentecost that would lead Christianity to a new evangelical freshness and unity, Brother Roger's hope in young people as partners in the realisation of his vision of ecumenical communion was never lost. With the

progressive spiritualisation and privatisation of his vision of visible unity, the mission of awakening young people to the presence of a communion building Christ remained central in his thought (Schutz 1983b: 11, 48). This spirituality of awakening remained always solidly anchored to the necessity of a coherent practical commitment to fulfil Christ's prayer for unity. This invisible construction was seen as vital for the contemporary missional credibility of the Church, especially with the younger generations (Roger 1986: 54, 112; 2003: 49-52; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 75, 80-85, 87). Consistent with his view in God's providential leading of history, Brother Roger believed the spiritual rebirth of the Church was still at work in the invisible movement of those who already lived the reality of reconciliation and worked for human dignity and peace (Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 80-85). In line with this optimistic faith in the future, his characterisation of young people remained highly idealised – youth being presented as filled with trust, bearers of reconciliation, passionate for justice even to the cost of their lives and, therefore, creators of that spiritual communion which was, in his view, the real essence of the Church (Roger 1986: 41, 48, 58, 85, 99, 127; 2003: 2-3; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 72-74, 97, 100, 03, 12-13). In their inventiveness and hope, the Prior of Taizé could discern an affirmation of God's power to illuminate and change the world, a refusal to see life as a blind succession of events (Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 112-13). The Community's mission towards young people was, therefore, a ministry at the very heart of the Church, a transformative sign born out of Christ's desire to be with human beings, to be involved in the suffering of the world, and to build a welcoming place for all human beings (Roger 1986: 52-54; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 118, 28).

The words written by Brother Roger before his death are the clearest expression of his unshakable faith in this invisible horizon and an enthusiastic affirmation of his hope in young people:

*Chacun peut commencer à devenir, par sa propre vie, un foyer de paix. Quand des jeunes prennent une résolution intérieure pour la paix et pour la confiance, ils soutiennent une espérance qui se transmet au loin, toujours plus loin. A Taizé, certaines soirées d'été, sous un ciel chargé d'étoiles, nous entendons les jeunes par nos fenêtres ouvertes. Nous demeurons étonnés qu'ils viennent nombreux. Ils cherchent, ils prient. Et nous nous disons : leurs aspirations à la paix et à la confiance sont comme ces étoiles, petites lumières dans la nuit. Aussi, pour ma part, j'irai jusqu'au bout du monde, si je le pouvais, pour dire et redire ma confiance dans les jeunes générations.*<sup>102</sup> (Schutz 2005: 150)

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<sup>102</sup> Translation: 'Each person can begin to become, by his or her own life, a point from which peace radiates outward. When young people make an inner resolution for peace and trust, they sustain a hope that is communicated afar, always further afar. On some summer evenings in Taizé, under a sky laden with stars, we can hear the young people through our open windows. We are constantly astonished that there are so many of them. They search; they pray. And we say to ourselves: their aspirations to peace and trust are like these stars, points of light that shine in the night.'

In conclusion, it seems possible to affirm that the Community's ministry to young people should be understood as an essential vehicle of its overall commitment to a broad spiritual, ecumenical, and missional vision aimed at reconciling human beings to Christ and to each other. In my overview of Brother Roger's understanding of Taizé's mission to youth, I also highlighted his awareness of the divergence between the theology mediated through the Community's embodied parable of reconciliation and young people's actual aspirations. As I showed above, to these concerns the founder of Taizé responded with a firm faith in the possibility for young people to be awakened to Christ's communion and to the ascetic demands this implied. To problematise this response, in the next chapter I will proceed to explore young people's subjective appropriation of Taizé's theological mediation. The objective of my thesis is, in fact, to highlight young people's diverging and sometimes competing understandings of the Community's mediated expressions and to point out the gap between its implicitly dualistic, ascetic theology and young pilgrims' holistic and subject-centred interpretations. As anticipated in the methodology, my investigation will now take the form of a case study analysing the actual experience of two youth groups participating in pilgrimages organised by the Church of England.



## **Chapter 4 - Taizé and young people's voices**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Following Swinton and Mowat's practical theological methodology (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94), this first part of the thesis aimed at reconstructing the historical context in which the Community's ministry to young people emerged, as well its theological foundations. In this chapter, I will further progress towards the objective of my study by engaging in the second stage of Swinton and Mowat's methodological approach (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94-96). This will involve complexifying my initial reconstruction by introducing a new conversation partner: the voices of Taizé's young pilgrims (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94-96). As anticipated in the methodology (Chapter Two), in this chapter qualitative research methods will constitute the guiding framework of a disciplined investigation into young people's experiences at the Taizé Community. In harmony with the purpose of the thesis, my focus will thus shift from the reconstruction of the meanings underlying the Community's practice to the study of young people's interpretation of their actual pilgrimage experience. The following sections will present the findings of my fieldwork with two youth groups involved in Church of England-sponsored trips organised during the summers of 2009 and 2010. The purpose of this empirical investigation will be to bring to the fore the plurality of theological perspectives interacting in the arena of Taizé pilgrimages. In the context of my thesis, the objective of this chapter will be to detect possible discrepancies between the theology mediated by the Community and young people's interpretations.

The chapter will start by presenting the results of my fieldwork as a participant observer. The first section (4.2) will reconstruct the broader ecclesial context in which the practice of youth pilgrimages to Taizé is appropriated as a ministry resource. Furthermore, it will examine the dynamics underlying participants' recruitment, and it will identify some key characteristics of the youth sample considered. The chapter will continue by analysing the unfolding of a pilgrimage week at Taizé. In line with the objective of the thesis, this part of my presentation will focus on the Community's theological mediation and its specific articulation of the Christian practice of pilgrimage (4.3). After having clarified the practical shape of Taizé's youth pilgrimages, my attention will turn to pilgrims' subjective understandings of their experience. These will be analysed based on the findings emerging from my interviews. Thus, I will start by introducing the individual profiles included in my sample (4.4); I will continue by reconstructing the

subjective aspirations motivating interviewees' choice to participate in a pilgrimage to the Community (4.5 and 4.6). The following section will focus on exploring participants' understanding of Taizé's ministry purpose (4.7). The final part of the chapter will investigate young people's subjective interpretations of their pilgrimage experience and will specifically focus on their appropriation of two key expressions of the Community's theological mediation: its catechesis (4.8.1) and its daily communal prayers (4.8.2). The chapter will be closed by an analysis of interviewees' perspectives on the significance of their overall pilgrimage experience (4.9).

Having illustrated the purpose and structure of this chapter and its relationship with the general objective of this thesis, I will now proceed to present the findings emerging from my fieldwork.

## **4.2 The broader picture: Taizé pilgrimages as youth ministry resource in the Church of England**

British youth pilgrimages to Taizé can hardly be considered as a spontaneously generated phenomenon. Rather, as I will show below, they are the result of a well-developed strategy enacted by representatives of the Church of England, who every year actively work to organise and promote these trips. In the context of a study on diverging interpretations, this is not a neutral observation, as it points out to the fundamental issue of the dynamics underlying the ecclesial appropriation of these pilgrimages as a youth ministry resource. Based on my fieldwork as a participant observer, in this section I will explore the background and modalities of this appropriation within the Church of England context. The presentation will show how leaders tend to utilise these pilgrimages as a resource to meet contextual needs and generally ex-corporate them from the specific ecumenical framework underlying the Community's mission. In light of the purpose of this thesis, this divergence of objectives constitutes the primary context in which young people's interpretations will need to be considered. Furthermore, the section will throw light on the dynamics underlying the promotion of these initiatives and the recruitment of their participants. These elements will contribute to explain some general characteristics of the sample taken into consideration.

In the United Kingdom, the tradition of youth pilgrimages to Taizé can be traced back to the mid-1960s. The relationships between the Community and the Church of England reached a peak in 1992, when Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey (Carey 1994) led a memorable pilgrimage

involving about 1,000 young people from all across the United Kingdom. To date, during the summer months, the Archbishop of Canterbury and high representatives of the Church of England pay regular visits to the Community to spend time with the Anglican-sponsored youth groups visiting Taizé. Furthermore, a cycle of promotional activities is run every year by the Community to advertise its youth retreats among Anglican and Catholic young people.

Every summer, during the months of July and August, an average of fifteen to twenty youth groups of variable size,<sup>103</sup> organised predominantly by Anglican dioceses from across England and Wales, cross the Channel to spend a weekly retreat at Taizé. The leaders of these groups often have a strong personal attachment to the Community, having themselves been Taizé pilgrims in their youth (Casti 2009). This was the case of the leader of the first youth pilgrimage I joined, Jane, an Anglican vicar who had visited Taizé every year for the last three decades, since she was a teen, and participated in the famous 'crossing of the Channel' led by Archbishop George Carey in 1992 (Casti 2009). Two leaders of the second youth pilgrimage, Mark and Betty, presented similar profiles. Mark had participated in nineteen previous youth pilgrimages to Taizé, initially as a young pilgrim and later as a leader. One of these played a crucial role in his decision to become an Anglican priest. Betty went to Taizé with her parents since she was a child and continued to attend these pilgrimages independently as a youth and eventually as a leader (Casti 2010). This pattern of long and close familiarity with the Community was recurrent among those (mostly Anglican clergy members) who organise youth pilgrimages to Taizé, and was not of secondary importance among the motivations leading them to organise these trips (Casti 2009). The sense of having individually benefitted from the spiritual environment and friendship opportunities made available by the Community was, in fact, among the main motivations leading Anglican clergy to bring new generations to Taizé (Casti 2010, 2009). Faced with a religious landscape characterised by dwindling numbers and an increasing sense of marginality of Christian belief, these leaders considered Taizé as a safe space where young people could break their sense of isolation as believers, refresh their spiritual energies and, by meeting other Christians of the same age, find a renewed sense of plausibility for their faith. Particularly in smaller congregations, the participation in a diocese-organised pilgrimage was sometimes the only opportunity for the few young people still attending to get in contact with other Anglican youth and, in general, broaden their circle of

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<sup>103</sup> The size of the British groups can range from a few individuals to a maximum of thirty members, with a majority being of smaller size (Casti 2009, 2010).

Christian friends. In these contexts, a pilgrimage to Taizé often represented one of the rare youth oriented activities available during the ecclesial year (Casti 2010, 2009).

The promotion of these retreats among young people was conducted in different ways. At parish level, it took place through posters or personal contacts with young people and their families. Clergy and youth leaders also advertised these trips in schools; at university level, Taizé pilgrimages frequently feature in chaplains' yearly programmes. Furthermore, numerous Taizé-style worship are regularly organised in the United Kingdom by local parishes, dioceses, or university chaplaincies. These are natural outlets to promote these pilgrimages (Casti 2010, 2009). Such a strategy of recruitment implies that most pilgrimage participants regularly attended a religious congregation and often showed higher-than-average patterns of religious practice. They were generally involved in church activities and responsibilities, and in some cases played a direct role as leaders of a youth group (Casti 2010, 2009).

To reach a sufficient number of participants, the organisation of a pilgrimage often associates different parishes or, most commonly, the territory of entire dioceses (Casti 2010, 2009). The result of this strategy is that participants are often scattered in relatively large territories. In the case of the two groups I observed, few youth attended the same congregation or lived in the same area (Casti 2010, 2009). As a consequence, participants rarely meet beyond the week they spend together at Taizé (Casti 2010, 2009). In some cases, congregations sponsor young people's participation. This was the case of at least one youth in my first group (Casti 2010, 2009).

The preparation for the pilgrimage is differently managed from group to group. In the first pilgrimage I attended, it did not go beyond e-mail messaging regarding administrative details such as registration, travel arrangements, and information about what to bring to Taizé (Casti 2009). No preparatory meeting was organised and no follow-up gathering had been planned since the previous summer (Casti 2009). Eight out of ten participants—five males and five females, all university-age—had already been to Taizé for a weekly retreat in the past (Casti 2009). The idea of a post-Taizé meeting was suggested during the return trip, but this informal reunion was planned entirely on young people's initiative (Casti 2009).

The preparation of the second pilgrimage I was involved with was managed differently. The trip included seventeen young people—eleven females and six males—whose age ranged from seventeen to thirty-four. Underage young people constituted about one third of the group, and for the majority of the participants this was their first experience at Taizé (Casti 2010).

Pilgrimage leaders organised a preparatory meeting to allow the group to meet for the first time, provide practical information, and watch a video about what to expect from a week at Taizé<sup>104</sup> (Casti 2010). However, given the optional nature of this gathering, participants' distance from the place where it was held, and the necessity to leave registration open as long as possible, not all participants attended (Casti 2010). On the leaders' initiative, a reunion was planned in the weeks following young people's return from Taizé to share photos and videos of the trip. No further form of follow-up was officially planned (Casti 2010).

In general, young people's participation in the pilgrimage rarely seemed to be part of an ecumenically focused, sustained ministry strategy at the local level. Young pilgrims were rarely introduced to the vision and purpose of the Taizé Community prior to their visit and sometimes had little awareness of these even after multiple visits. Surprisingly, this was also true for those who had previously attended Taizé services in their local contexts. For many of them, Taizé was simply the name of a liturgical style or the author of a song, and they often ignored the existence of a Community behind it.<sup>105</sup> For most participants, the main source of information about Taizé had been its website, which they accessed after being invited to join the pilgrimage. Few young people used it to learn more about the history and purpose of the Community; the majority sought practical information about useful items to carry on their travel, watched videos on what to expect from a weekly retreat, or listened to songs (Casti 2009, 2010).

At this preliminary level, it is possible to conclude that Church of England institutions predominantly appropriate youth pilgrimages to Taizé as a resource to support local youth ministry. An implication of this use, which prioritises youth retention, is a marginalisation of the ecumenical horizon originally embedded in this practice. The purpose of this appropriation and the form of recruitment illustrated above also explain some key characteristics of the population involved. This is generally composed of young people who regularly attend Anglican parishes or schools, or are in contact with a university chaplaincy; furthermore, they generally report higher-than-average patterns of youth attendance. This tendency suggests a use of these pilgrimages not as an alternative form of autonomously regulated spirituality but as an integration of ordinary religious practice intended to cyclically strengthen young people's faith commitment.

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<sup>104</sup> The video, available on the Community website, is a brief introduction to Taizé's youth retreats and provides basic information about the history of the Community (Taizé 2012a).

<sup>105</sup> This problem is not uncommon. Encouraged by the Community, in 2008 Jason Santos wrote an introduction to Taizé intended to provide basic information about its vision and mission. The work was motivated by the Community's concern about an increasing trend to disconnect the use of Taizé's liturgical style and songs from their original purpose (Santos 2008). This tendency is particularly widespread in the United States, but the interviews would suggest that similar issues could also be detected in the United Kingdom.

### **4.3 Taizé's articulation of pilgrimage practice: youth weekly retreats**

After having introduced the ecclesial context in which the practice of youth pilgrimages to Taizé is appropriated, in this section I will analyse the Community's practical mediation as expressed in its weekly youth retreats. Consistent with the object of this thesis, the presentation will pay specific attention to the interplay between the institution's attempts at mediating and preserving the intended meaning of its practice and young people's often diverging appropriation.

To a stranger's eye, a youth group leaving on a summer Saturday morning to start a pilgrimage to Taizé would look like any other group of backpackers travelling to enjoy a week in France on a low cost holiday. Colourful summer clothing, hats, the inseparable smartphone, a jam-packed backpack, a tent, and a messy array of torches, camping mats, and sleeping bags - everything makes these young people virtually indistinguishable from the many who, every summer, leave the United Kingdom to visit Europe (Casti 2009, 2010). Participants' look can vary from the long-haired, black-dressed young man wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt (Casti 2010), to the girl with pink highlights and multiple ear piercings (Casti 2009), to the young man with platinum-blond dyed hair (Casti 2009), to the two young ladies in romantic floral clothing chatting in the parking lot while waiting for the coach (Casti 2010). Both groups I followed were predominantly Caucasian, with few exceptions – two Pakistani young women (Casti 2009) and a young man of West Indian descent (Casti 2010). Pilgrimage organisers have a youthful, casual appearance and rarely wear any sign of their status as leaders or clergy members, which allows them to blend with the group and implicitly erase hierarchical differences (Casti 2009, 2010).

Different from other forms of pilgrimage in which the journey represents an essential element of pilgrims' transformative experience, journeying to Taizé is virtually indistinguishable from travelling for tourism purposes. The buses that collect youth groups to carry them across the Channel and on to Taizé are very similar to those that every summer take young people to Paris, Florence, or Copenhagen. However, this blurring of differences is only partial. The Community cooperates with a single British bus company, which from mid-June to the end of August ensures weekly connections from Birmingham (with intermediate stops in major cities) and London to Taizé. Unlike other forms of church-sponsored youth trips, it is unusual for British Taizé groups to rent their own vehicle and include their retreat in a multi-stop itinerary of a summer holiday in France. A blurring of lines between religious and leisure travelling is not an uncommon phenomenon in pilgrimages, and the boundaries between the two are often

contested and fluctuating in pilgrims' subjective experience. Taizé pilgrimages do not constitute an exception, but the Community actively tries to reduce this blurring to a minimum. No intermediate tourist stop is planned during the travel, apart from the necessary pauses to eat and rest. The journey converges towards a single, transformative centre: Taizé (Casti 2010, 2009). And yet, this implicitly dualistic attempt at marking a distance between Taizé and the ordinary dimension of young people's life is not necessarily uncontested. After the initial excitement of finding old friends and meeting new ones, during the long travel young pilgrims revert to their practices, from listening to heavy metal or feminist grunge music to singing the Beatles, writing, reading Jane Austen or a British history book, playing games on their smartphones or cards in the back of bus (Casti 2010, 2009). No unifying spiritual programme prepares them for their pilgrimage experience, which begins by making individual, independent trajectories temporarily converge towards the same physical centre (Casti 2010, 2009).

The attempt to preselect pilgrims by actively trying to preserve the boundaries between leisure and religious travel has characterised Taizé's strategy for decades. For the same reason, the Community has dedicated considerable efforts to oppose any project of building hotels in the village of Taizé or its immediate surroundings. Such a presence would significantly alter the nature of the pilgrimage experience as articulated by the Community. Upon arrival, youth groups are in fact projected into an immersive environment that imposes a suspension of ordinary life, whose complexity and fluidity is temporarily simplified and restructured. This reorientation is mediated in the geography of the Community, whose centre is the Church of Reconciliation. Its golden domes dominate the landscape, together with the bell tower whose tolls structure the day around morning, midday and evening prayers. This space and time organisation expresses an alternative hierarchy of values in contrast with young people's everyday reality, and mediates an embodied spiritual pedagogy (Casti 2010, 2009). Facilities allocated for group activities such as Bible introductions, workshops, and meetings are clearly distributed next to the church, while across the main campus, situated remotely at its far upper end, are those dedicated to quiet, individual reflection (Casti 2010, 2009). At the upper margin of the campus, a tent hosts adult visitors' and group leaders' activities and meals, which take place apart from the young people, as the Community requires (Casti 2010, 2009). These areas, and the church building itself, are separated from the camping grounds by a road that cuts across the Community. The modest pub present on the campus—the only one in a small village completely surrounded by countryside—is situated at the lower margin of the camping

grounds and managed by the Community itself, together with a very small convenience store. Their opening times are arranged in such a way that they may never compete with spiritual activities (Casti 2010, 2009).

Life at Taizé is not only characterised by mechanisms of distancing, simplification, and restructuring. A further, essential element in its way of functioning consists in an intentional levelling of hierarchies, roles, and barriers. An important strategy of levelling is homogenisation: all Taizé pilgrims follow the same basic day schedule, whose axis is constituted by the three daily prayer services. The same levelling strategy also involves pilgrims' accommodations. These are the same for everyone—very basic and 'transient': tents for the majority of the visitors and simple dormitories with bunk beds for the rest. In a similar way, pilgrims have no alternative but to share the same simple food distributed to thousands of young people in long queues, three times a day. A further, important mechanism of levelling is constituted by young people's organisation in work teams. Everybody cooperates in making life at Taizé possible, from those who help in the kitchen to those who distribute the meals, clean the toilets and other shared spaces, or welcome the newcomers (Casti 2010, 2009). These mechanisms provisionally conceal the complexity of everyday life in the outside world and suggest an implicit dualism between a spiritual and an earthly dimension. Furthermore, levelling implies that horizontal rather than vertical relationships are the norm. This allows a temporary sense of community to emerge from the individual trajectories of the young people converging at Taizé.

During these pilgrimages, time is organised around three daily prayer services of variable length and slightly different structure, with a morning prayer that includes a communion/Eucharist service, a shorter midday prayer just before lunch, and a longer evening prayer that flows into a song vigil for those who want to continue singing, praying, or meditating. All prayer services share a similar structure made of repetitive meditative singing, a short Bible reading followed by a time of silence, and prayer. Singing represents a key component of these liturgies, as emphasised in the short introduction to the songbooks distributed to every participant at the beginning of each daily prayer:

*Song is one of the most essential elements of worship. Short chants, repeated again and again, give it a meditative character. Using just a few words, they express a basic reality of faith, quickly grasped by the mind. As the words are sung over many times, this reality gradually penetrates the whole being. (Taizé 2009a)*

Songs are conceived as a way of praying that makes use of short quotes from authors of the Christian tradition—from the Gospels to Augustine to Bonhoeffer (Taizé 2009a). This sung form



of catechesis makes available a warehouse of raw Christian material to young people's subjective appropriation. In these chants, in fact, centuries of Christian thought are juxtaposed in a simplified form to symbolically mediate the spiritual unity of the Christian tradition (Casti 2009, 2010). Singing has a paramount role in the Community's mediation of its ecumenical vision. Chants are always sung in unison, with the choir and the orchestra hidden on one side of the nave and intentionally indistinguishable from the audience. Their harmony provides a musical representation of individuals' fusion in an all-embracing communion—a further application of the mechanism of levelling seen at work in other areas of the Community's life (Casti 2010, 2009).

During prayer services Bible readings are usually very short and simple, as they '*should be able to be understood without any explanation*' (Taizé 2009a). Bible passages are read in multiple languages and consigned to young people's subjective appropriation during the following time of silence (usually about eight minutes), which replaces a traditional homily or sermon. As my interviews will show, young people often inhabit this worship structure in creative, unpredictable forms (Casti 2009, 2010).

Another key element in the structure of Taizé's weekly retreats consists in the catechesis of the 'Bible introductions'. These involve a series of daily presentations made by Taizé Brothers on selected passages from one of the Gospels. The theme of the series attended by my first youth group was the Gospel of Mark, while for the second it was the Gospel of John. Besides the catechesis, these meetings have organisational and socialising purposes. At the beginning of each, directions are given about the daily or weekly programme; 'veteran' Taizé pilgrims are invited to cooperate in helping first-timers to adjust and encouraging them take part in all activities. This is intended to foster a culture of collective responsibility for the other. During these presentations, the Brothers tend to adopt an informal attitude, often reverting to anecdotes and jokes to illustrate a passage; their quotes predominantly draw from early Christian authors and Brother Roger's writings. The Gospels are made available as simple, universally applicable faith narratives to be subjectively appropriated, and rarely refer to a specific historical, political, or social context. Rather, they are presented as the source of a subject-centred spirituality, a universal '*wellspring of faith*' (Taizé 2012a). The themes of spiritual searching, trust and healing, friendship, and communion with God and the other dominate the presenters' focus. A recurring topic is the invitation to respond, without hesitation, to Jesus' call to be his disciples. Young people should resist the temptation of asking too many

questions and experience faith primarily as an invitation to trust and follow<sup>106</sup> (Casti 2009). No interaction with the speaker is planned after the presentations, which are offered as foundational material for the small group discussions. These take place immediately after in the morning or later in the afternoon (Casti 2010, 2009).

Small groups constitute one of the key aspects of young people's experience at Taizé. They are spontaneously formed and allow young people to aggregate with peers coming from different countries. Once constituted, they remain the same for the entire week; they generally include no more than eight young people. They have multiple functions: social, as they are a means to break cultural and language boundaries and make new friends; organisational, as they constitute the basic unit through which the Community organises volunteer work (food preparation and distribution, cleaning, etc.); spiritual, as they are designed to be young people's first community and enact a pedagogy of communal faith life, accountability, and respect for individual diversity (Casti 2010, 2009). Small groups also have a key role in Taizé's catechesis, as it is during these discussions that the subjects presented during Bible introductions are designed to be appropriated. To fulfil this task, young people receive a list of questions, mostly centred on themes connected to their spiritual life. The outline invites everyone to be open and share thoughts and experiences with other group members.<sup>107</sup> As I will show below, these groups have a great significance in young people's spiritual experience at Taizé, although in more complex and contradictory ways than their intended goal would imply (Casti 2009, 2010).

A more marginal role in the programme of Taizé's weekly retreats is played by afternoon workshops. They attract a limited number of young people and involve a presentation followed by a time for questions. Their topics predominantly revolve around areas connected to the Community's ecumenical mission (interreligious dialogue, commitment to peace, dialogue between science and religion, spirituality). A regular workshop is dedicated to the theme of marriage, which focuses on how to build a lasting relationship within the framework of a

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<sup>106</sup> This emphasis on prioritising experiencing over intellectual questioning is further developed in a video made available by the Community. The speaker is Brother Paolo: *'In today's world there is quite a lot of pressure on people to be very precise about what they think, what they believe, what their position is, and sometimes that puts the human being in a situation which is very sterile, where they can't learn, where their lives can't be touched and changed. The life of faith is a life where we are growing, and I think that many young people discover at Taizé, perhaps for the first time, that faith, Christianity, is not about having a list of right answers, but it's about growing, searching, discovering, growing into a relationship'*. For those young people who are unsure about whether they believe or not, the model of discipleship is that imparted by Jesus, who did not ask disciples for *'anything complicated'*, or for *'what they believed'* but just for them to leave their nets and take a risk. Only later, were disciples asked to *'put into words what they understand about him'*. At Taizé young people *'begin to trust, they allow themselves to listen with their hearts, and they begin to let their lives to be changed'* while *'possibly the words, the understanding, the theology if you like, comes later'* (Taizé 2012b).

<sup>107</sup> These discussion outlines typically include the Bible passage of the day, a quote from the Prior's yearly *Letter*, and a set of questions (Taizé 2010: 1).

heterosexual marriage. Workshop speakers are generally the Brothers themselves, sometimes supported by an 'expert' or by young adults who may provide their testimony (as in the case of the workshops on marriage).

In conclusion, this section provided initial suggestions about the contested character of the practice of pilgrimage at Taizé. Furthermore, it shed light on the way the Community concretely articulates its ecumenical theology as a specific form of pilgrimage experience. In this regard, the presentation particularly focused on how Taizé mediates its ecumenical vision. Through embodied strategies of restructuring, levelling, and re-centring, Taizé temporarily stages a utopian, spiritually centred community that is prophetically alternative to life in the ordinary world. With this reconstruction of the objective characteristics of the Community's mediation in mind, I will now proceed to investigate young people's subjective interpretations of their pilgrimage experience. To fulfil this task, in the next section I will start by introducing my interviewees. The reconstruction of these profiles is important in light of the objective of the thesis. As I will show in the second part of the chapter, each individual's pilgrimage experience represented an intensification of a trajectory that had started well before her arrival at Taizé. This implies that interviewees' interpretations and way of inhabiting the spiritual vehicle provided by the Community varied greatly, depending on their personal and spiritual journey, and often substantially diverged from the theology embedded in Taizé's practical expressions.

#### **4.4 Interviewees' profiles**

**Helen.** Aged between eighteen and twenty-two, she is the daughter of an Anglican clergy person of Evangelical tradition. She struggles to articulate her faith in words, as she does not '*speak theology*'. Her faith is mostly expressed in the language of emotions and perceptions, but has always been the vital centre of her life. Since her father decided to become an Anglican priest, when she was in her late childhood, she has struggled to come to terms with the feeling that he had been taken away from her. When her father was a ministerial trainee she had to attend multiple congregations and felt as though she was living '*in a travelling circus*', always exposed to public attention. That experience was very damaging for her, and in her early teen years she suffered from a serious eating disorder. During that time, she never lost her relationship with God, but she came to hate attending church. Later, she was able to open up with her parents and start a journey of recovery, during which they incarnated the essence of God's love for her.

Her mother, a Baptist converted to Anglicanism, is still the greatest spiritual influence in her life. The essence of Helen's faith is affective and relational, and could be explained as the feeling of a loving presence. Thus, when she is at home she is '*always chatting with God, even about minimal things*'. She would like to have a more structured spiritual life, and sometimes she gets up early to spend time in prayer and Bible reading but soon gets bored, starts counting pages, and eventually falls asleep again. Her relationship with the Church is still difficult. Even now that she has finally resumed attending, she often has silent fights with her mother, in the middle of a worship service, to get the keys of their home and come back. A self-defined feminist and an eager listener of grunge music, she acts in a small Christian company that uses theatre as an educational tool to build people's self-esteem. She believes her calling is to put her gift for acting to meaningful use for God to fight gender stereotypes and help teenagers build their self-esteem. She is at Taizé for the first time.

**Roberta.** She falls within the twenty-seven to thirty age range and works part-time as a staff member in an Anglican institution connected to an estate of historical significance. She attends a congregation of the High Church tradition and dislikes Evangelicalism because she perceives it as a 'new' faith, which goes against her convictions concerning what religion should feel like. In her view, Anglican Evangelicals are too loud in their worship expressions, and she finds their liturgical style (which she describes as '*praise the Lord and guitaring*') off-putting. She attended a Church of England school and was brought up in the conviction that God existed. During her university years, however, she started questioning the religious views she inherited from her parents. Recently, she has become attracted by Buddhism for its faith in a universal connection that links all beings and for its idea of reincarnation. Roberta describes her idea of God as something in-between a personal friend and an '*all-surrounding whatever*', a pervasive presence that can be sensed in everything, a reassuring inner guide which leads people through life without judging or making one feel guilty. She does not believe in Christ, whom she defines as a sort of '*middleman*', someone who did not show any understanding of the culture of his time and committed many mistakes that upset those who loved him. Rather than dealing with him, she prefers to communicate directly with '*the big one*', God himself. Theological debates interest her from a cultural viewpoint, and she attends a group including people '*with doctoral degrees*'. What she finds particularly interesting in her participation in these discussions is the possibility of wrestling with the Scriptures and better understanding them. When she was younger, Roberta left the Anglican congregation where she had grown up

because it was not sufficiently open-minded. The congregation she now attends feels like a family and is extremely accepting. Furthermore, she is part of a choir and a house group connected to her parish. In her opinion, however, exclusive church labels should not limit people, as *'you can really call mankind Church'*. There are many paths to the same destination, and it would be arrogant for Christianity to claim being the only true way to God. For this reason, she prefers to combine the insights from different religious traditions—Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and Hesychasm—as she believes that human beings should learn from each other's wisdom. In her view, in fact, those faith groups that refuse to learn from other religious traditions are narrow-minded and misguided. Churches become harmful to people when they try to regulate their life. Roberta has completed an MA in Comparative Literature. Passionate about music, she plays three instruments and likes to explore different genres. This is her first experience at Taizé.

**Sandra.** She is between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two and is part of the Methodist Church, for which she works as a part-time youth leader and Sunday school teacher. Furthermore, she is in charge of organising youth events in cooperation with the Church of England. Her approach to youth ministry is non-directive: she does not like being prescriptive about what young people should do but prefers to walk with them and let them know they are not alone in their journey. At a personal level, she has always believed in God, although she cannot recall having ever lived an identifiable conversion experience. For Sandra, believing should involve regular prayer and Bible study, but she finds it difficult to maintain this commitment in her daily life. When she has time, she puts Taizé music on as background (she is a Taizé 'veteran', having visited the Community multiple times before) and writes things down *'from the heart'* about how things are going in her life and relationship with God. In her view, faith life should be marked by growth in God and by a concrete commitment to be an active witness. However, she thinks that churches' demands are often too high, which can constitute a barrier for those whose faith is still precarious. Her understanding of God is relational and expressed in terms of presence, love, and guidance through life. As a child she attended a Church of England school and a Sunday school. She grew up convinced that *'the stories she was told about God'* were true. However, when she was between 12 and 16 years of age she stopped attending church because she felt she had no real understanding of what she really believed. Nevertheless, she continued participating in communion services at her school. Taizé was an important influence in her faith development, as it was her first pilgrimage to the

Community that triggered her decision to resume attending her church. More specifically, meeting other Christian youth at Taizé validated and gave plausibility to Sandra's faith at a critical moment of her life. Growing up in a parish with few young people, she had started to question the actual meaning of the Bible 'stories' she had learned in her childhood. Taizé reassured her by providing visible evidence that she was not alone and marginal in her beliefs but part of a larger community of young believers. Despite having spent years away from her childhood congregation, after that experience she decided to resume her church attendance. Being hired as a youth leader had a key role in strengthening her identity as a believer, as it implied benefitting from the support of adult mentors. Furthermore, being involved in youth ministry helped her to clarify her beliefs, made her more confident, and gave her a sense of purpose and belonging. It is when she is surrounded by young people speaking about their faith that she feels the fullness of God's love and presence. In those moments she says to herself: *'This is why I'm Christian and I do what I do'*. She has an undergraduate degree in English Literature. This is her fifth pilgrimage to the Community.

**Debbie.** Aged between twenty-seven and thirty, she is the only non-British member of the group. She is from the United States and has temporarily moved to Great Britain for study reasons. She grew up in a closely-knit Mennonite congregation, and she attended a denominational elementary school. The book from which she learned to read was the Bible, and the first word she read was 'God'. She defines the Mennonite Church as a tradition characterised by a very literal approach to Bible reading. In her view, believing primarily means accepting the doctrinal foundations of Christianity. To describe the essence of her faith, she quotes by heart Romans 10.9: *'Christ has risen from the dead and because of that, those who believe he was God's son and follow him in life... will then be with him in heaven'*. What Christ has done by offering us the opportunity to be in a relationship with the Trinity reverberates and multiplies to give life to the Church. When speaking, she often uses Scriptural passages and references, and almost exclusively emphasises the objective dimension of faith. Two major influences shaped her faith: her mother's example and a correspondence Bible course she followed with the Southern Baptist Church. Concerning this last influence, she takes care to note that despite the extremely conservative character of this denomination, its teachings are firmly rooted in the Scriptures. Since she moved to the United Kingdom, she has been unable to attend a Mennonite congregation, and therefore she has started attending an Anglican Church worship service. This experience has opened her eyes and broadened her horizon. She

particularly enjoys the Anglican liturgical style and her parish's fellowship. She misses her Mennonite congregation, however, with which she had a very close relationship. In her view, a church is, above all, a place where Christians take care of each other, working to support those in emotional, spiritual, or practical need. She is finishing an MA in Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies, after which she will start her PhD studies in the same area. This is her first time at Taizé.

**Amber.** She is between twenty-three and twenty-six years of age and was raised in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. At present, she belongs to a '*relaxed, modern, friendly*' congregation attended by people from different backgrounds and levels of commitment. In her early teen years, Amber started to question her childhood faith beliefs and eventually rejected Christianity. She was looking for a deeper meaning for her life. Eventually, Christianity started making sense again and felt like a comfortable place where she could '*fit*'. A religious education teacher, who worked at the Church of England school she attended, played a key role during this transition. What triggered her journey back to faith was the understanding that Christians do not have to be models of goodness and can experience failure. Thus, in her mid-teens she decided to be confirmed in the school chapel, which she considered as her true church. Today, she feels she is still on a journey and trying to define what it means to be a Christian. Only during her university years, however, did she start feeling confident enough to tell others about her faith. Like Helen, she finds very difficult to articulate her belief in God into words, and she could never imagine herself '*praying out loud and having house groups*'. Her idea of God is, above all, affective and relational: a loving, accepting presence that leads her life, sometimes imperceptibly. She struggles with low self-esteem and for this reason she finds the idea of God's unconditional love sometimes hard to accept but very comforting. The only way she feels comfortable to express her faith is through music and singing. The closest expression of what her faith means to her is the text of her favourite Christian song, '*Heavens rejoice*', by Lex Buckley. This song deeply touches her because, despite the self-confident image she projects, she does not think much of herself. Deeply involved in church activities (she also attends a house group), she considers her church as an extension of her family, a network that supports her through difficult times. She is the youngest person in her congregation. She has an undergraduate degree in the medical area, where she also works. This is her first time at Taizé.

**Alex.** He falls within the thirty-one to thirty-five age range. Born and raised in the United Kingdom, he is the only participant of West Indian descent. He defines himself as a '*Taizé-*'

*believing Christian*'. He grew up in an urban setting where the risk of being involved in violence and drug-related crimes was very high. He attributes his resilience to his mother's influence, as she regularly brought him to church, and pushed him to attend the Sunday school and join youth club activities. During his youth, the feeling of being 'different' as a Christian living in a difficult environment made him aware of the importance of his faith and values. Over the years, this awareness developed as a strong sense of his calling to help other young people. Thus, he became first a junior leader in his youth club and then decided to pursue a career as a social worker specialised in helping children with disabilities. During his studies, he supported himself by working as a janitor, and eventually achieving his goal felt like the culmination of a personal journey. For him, being a Christian implies being able *'to raise above the limitations other people laid on me and inspire others to do the same'*. Christianity requires investing the entirety of one's energies to help those in need. For him, extending the Kingdom of God on earth is often synonymous with enlarging Taizé's sphere of influence, as he believes the Community could have a key role in promoting peace. His definition of the Kingdom of God is a quote from a well-known Taizé song: *'The Kingdom of God is justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit'*. Church attendance only has meaning if it motivates people to care for the others. Thus, unless Christians act coherently with the mission of making the earth God's Kingdom, they will never enjoy heaven. Believers should help others change their course of action, so that if the earth is destroyed they might still be able to enjoy the world to come, as they will have already internalised its essence. His life models are Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu, but he also admires Tony Blair's *'moral integrity'* and Obama. The congregation he currently attends is formally affiliated with the Church of England but includes people of very different backgrounds. For Alex, confessional distinctions are anachronistic and irrelevant as they imply exclusion, which he opposes. On the contrary, his congregation is inclusive and does not have any expectation other than asking individuals to maintain an ethos of love, acceptance, and genuineness. Its members *'don't need the priest to tell them "you need to change your life" or to preach hell and condemnation'*, as they are led by the Spirit. Their mission is to be active in promoting social justice, as *'the test of true godliness is action for the other, not church attendance'*. He attended three Taizé European meetings and two previous weekly retreats at the Community before his current pilgrimage.

**Jack.** He is between eighteen and twenty-two years of age and is completing an undergraduate degree in Zoology. He identifies himself as a Christian believer and currently attends a High



Church congregation. In the last two years, he has started thinking about the possibility of becoming a priest. He likes going out and laughing with friends, playing his guitar and listening to heavy metal music, particularly Led Zeppelin (*'Not exactly what you would expect from a typical Christian... we need Christians with variety'*), and spending time surfing on the web or on Facebook. For him being a believer means above all maintaining a close personal connection with God. He has often tried to reach out to university acquaintances to speak about his faith, but he has felt derided. However, he has recently found a circle of friends who are interested in listening. Jack's faith has been deeply influenced by his grandmother's example, with whom he always went to church. Because of some conflicts between the vicar and his family, he stopped attending for some time. During that transition, he never ceased considering himself as a Christian. His current congregation has a great influence on his faith, even if only few young people still attend. He likes being involved in its activities and is particularly appreciative of having been enrolled as a server during Eucharist services. His major concern revolves around the issue of the credibility of Christian faith in society. For him the Church is essentially a missionary community. Unfortunately, Christians are often perceived as *'Bible bashers'*, and would need to make more efforts to reach out to the unbelievers. In Jack's view, God is not some sort of king sitting on a throne but someone who deeply cares for everybody and does not discriminate between believers and unbelievers. The Church should better reflect God's nature and communicate kindness and acceptance, so that attending a congregation may be perceived as *'a pretty cool thing to do'*. This is his first visit to Taizé.

**Sarah.** She is between eighteen and twenty-two years of age and grew up considering herself as an atheist, but she has recently been baptised in the Church of England. For this reason, she is interested in issues related to the plausibility of faith, especially in the area of science. Her past image of Christianity was mostly shaped by the influence of television programmes. Religion was *'a tradition of the past.... Something to keep the rules in place... a leftover... a relic'*. Meeting some Christian students at her university caused her to question her views, as through their friendship she realised that they drew deep comfort from their faith. As a result, she started going to church with them and continued attending once they left. For her going to church is a way not to fade away, a reminder of her newly started journey at a time when her faith still feels transient and in need of becoming autonomous from her friends' support. At present, she is torn between the conservative religious ethos she learned from them and her desire to spend time with non-Christian young people, to go out, *'meet boys and stuff'*, and not

*'be the one going home on the bus at 11 o'clock'*. A major role in her decision to start attending a church was played by her exchanges with the local university chaplains, whom she came to respect for their not being afraid of discussing matters of science and faith. As they belonged to the Church of England, she decided to be baptised in this tradition. Her views about Jesus and God are still *'hazy'*, but she is attracted by the practice of spirituality, of which she emphasises the therapeutic aspects. For her attending a church or praying are ways to carve head space from her everyday busyness and think about the direction of her life. Spirituality represents a refuge in *'a nice, quiet place'*. So even though rationally she thinks talking with God may appear puerile, she finds those silent conversations helpful for her life. The aesthetic aspects of liturgy fascinate her; the lighting of candles, in particular, helps her focus. In the beauty of what surrounds her, she feels intimations of a deeper reality. In the past she participated in several pilgrimages organised by her university chaplaincy (to Ireland, to different religious centres in the United Kingdom and France, and to the Holy Land). She is completing an MA in Fine Arts and would like to pursue PhD studies in the area of sculpture. This is her first experience at Taizé.

#### **4.5 Getting away from one's life: young people's motivations to join the pilgrimage**

As anticipated in the introduction, the second part of this chapter will concentrate on exploring pilgrims' subjective interpretations of their pilgrimage experience. My presentation of the findings emerging from young people's interviews will start from illustrating the motivations leading them to join the pilgrimage.

Interviewees generally connected their choice of participating in a pilgrimage to Taizé not to a specific interest for the ecumenical vision promoted by the Community but to a personal and spiritual need to find relief from the pressure of everyday life. As highlighted in the first part of the chapter, several among the interviewees had little familiarity with Taizé at the time of their decision, which implied that the specific vision of the Community played little role in their choice. Rather, participating in a church-organised trip with other young people represented for them an opportunity to get some head space (Roberta, Amber, Debbie), find relief from the burden of daily concerns (Amber), and take some time to deal with personal and spiritual issues (Roberta, Amber, Debbie, Sarah, Jack). In this sense, joining a pilgrimage opened the possibility for

young people to find temporary refuge in a '*neutral territory*' (Roberta). By provisionally moving to this space, interviewees hoped to suspend the oppressive routine of their ordinary lives, recover their inner energies and a renewed sense of self, and find a new balance to face everyday struggles (Amber, Debbie, Roberta, Sarah). In this quest, self-search and search for God were holistically conceived and inseparable from each other (Amber, Debbie Roberta, Sarah), as illustrated by these excerpts from two interviews:

Manuela: Was there any specific motive that led you to come to Taizé?

Roberta: *It was to get head space, it was to get time apart from everything, to detach a while from my life back home and... and deal with things that I couldn't really... I've been kind of struggling with at home and wondering about... I needed to get away to find a neutral site to just... to just be for a while and have no obstructions, I suppose, if that is... my daily life is full of things to do and people to see... and you just get bound up in everything else you've got no time to think, honestly, and no time to really go through things, and hammer things out, so Taizé is a kind of neutral head space territory for me.* (Interview 2, p. 8)

Amber: *I think it's mainly... part of it is to just, like, recharge my batteries in all sorts of ways. I had quite a tough year with all the changes at work and I don't think at that time I had quite understood how much of a toll it had taken on me, sort of emotionally and mentally, um... So part of it was just to get away from my life for a bit and as I say, just don't have to think about one thing, having to worry about lots of... you know, all the different things with work and whatever is going on... And part of it was that I felt I needed to take some time to develop my relationship with God, with my faith, and look at it a bit more closely, you know, and think about how am I being a Christian in my day-to-day life, what am I doing well, what am I not doing so well, what do I think, feel what God wants me to do... and just getting some time to get away, clear out some head space and work it all out, so, yeah...* (Interview 5, p. 5)

The decision to leave for a weekly retreat could be connected to a personal crisis, to family difficulties (Debbie) or to the loss of a beloved one (Jack), and be perceived as a time of healing (Amber, Debbie) or spiritual questioning (Jack). However, in all the interviews, multiple reasons—often of very different nature—overlapped to determine the choice to join the pilgrimage. Thus, for all interviewees, a major motivation was also the possibility to meet other young people and enlarge their network of Christian friends, especially when their home congregation offered limited opportunities in this sense. For some, the trigger had been a general interest for visiting France, with little regard for the specific destination (Sandra). For Alex, participating in Taizé's weekly retreats represented an opportunity to blend cultural and spiritual interests. In his view, the Community was a place where he could enjoy an alternative, non-commercial form of vacation and come in contact with different Christian perspectives. Sarah joined the trip to Taizé because of a general interest in pilgrimages, fostered by previous visits to other shrines. In Helen's experience, the impulse to participate in what promotional posters presented as '*a week of exploring*' was also connected to personal curiosity about experiencing a pilgrimage ('*I wasn't really linking to Taizé*').

In conclusion, interviews evidenced that the decision to participate in a pilgrimage to the Community was primarily connected to a desire to put a distance between the self and an ordinary life perceived as alienating and oppressive. In some cases, this aspiration could be triggered by the loss of a beloved person, by a personal crisis, or by family issues. In this context, Taizé was interpreted as a space of spiritual and existential re-centring and recovery, a canopy for young people's holistic and this-life oriented quests. In pilgrims' perspective, in fact, spirituality, search for existential purpose and emotional balance intimately intersected. Despite the pervasiveness of these aspirations, however, it would be a mistake to attach young people's participation to a single motive. As I will further show below, young pilgrims' decision to participate in a Taizé pilgrimage was often connected to multiple motives. Among these emerged a dominant interest for broadening their network of friends, but also a desire to explore a different culture, to find an alternative way to spend a vacation, or a general curiosity to experience a pilgrimage. In this sense, spiritual and existential pursuits, piety and relaxation, the sacred and the earthly intimately intertwined. All these aspirations, in their holistic interrelatedness, underlay a dominant tendency to interpret the pilgrimage experience from a subject-centred perspective and represented a significant departure from the horizon of ecumenically focused ascetic commitment the Community mediated.

#### **4.6 Social and practical motivations**

Besides the motives presented above, the interviews highlighted the influence of social and practical factors on young people's decision to join the pilgrimage. From a practical viewpoint, especially for female interviewees the choice to be part of an organised pilgrimage implied minimising the burden of travel arrangements and the hassles of travelling alone in a foreign country (Roberta, Amber). Furthermore, for most interviewees the perspective of being part of a trip involving other young people represented a decisive factor. None of the interviewees would have considered going to Taizé by herself or spending a weekly retreat alone in silence (an option also provided by the Community). Most respondents closely connected participating in a pilgrimage to Taizé to the perspective of spending time with friends and meeting new people (Roberta, Sandra, Debbie, Amber, Alex, Jack, Sarah). In Roberta's words, Taizé was *'like a music festival'*, where it was better to come with others *'as only then you can share'*. The Community's uniqueness resided in its providing exceptional opportunities of access to other

young people. As such, travelling alone or choosing an individual option would have defeated one of the pilgrimage's main purposes:

*Roberta: There is too much going on with people, here, and... 'cause, you can hear the singing everywhere, and if you are in silence, obviously you can't join in with that... And it's such a major, major part of life here... So maybe in the UK somewhere, I could probably, I could probably shut up for a week quite happily, but for me at this point of my life this is what Taizé is about: not necessarily talking with them, just being around them, and having the chance, you could want to talk to them, even if you don't necessarily have to. (Interview 2, p. 8)*

All interviewees shared similar opinions about the significance of the social dimension at Taizé. In this perspective, being part of an organised group had the primary function of supporting their attempts at reaching out to new friends. The pilgrimage group was considered as a basic community to belong to (Sandra, Debbie) and a backup net (Sarah) to refer to at mealtime before going back to meet new people (Debbie, Amber, Alex, Sarah). For Debbie, her pilgrimage group was a primary relational circle to which she returned every evening to speak about her day or open up if something had not gone well; from it she drew the courage to reach out to new friends. Sharing her experience at Taizé with a group of people from her same country also reassured Amber, giving her the confidence to explore the many friendship opportunities provided by Taizé. For Sarah, being part of a group pilgrimage was an indispensable premise for an enjoyable experience, as in her opinion those who did not have a backup net ended up having a harder time making new friends.

Practical and social motivations also had a dominant role in Alex's choice to join the pilgrimage. For him, more than for others, being part of a group had the merely utilitarian function of making available a support network, in case of need. As a veteran of these retreats, his major motivation for joining the pilgrimage was connected to meeting people who would share his commitment to Taizé's vision. This element was so central for him that the only time he was willing to spend with his pilgrimage group was the two days of the travel to and from Taizé. Differently from him, other interviewees valued the opportunities of friendship offered by their pilgrimage group and looked forward to pursuing these relationships after the pilgrimage (Jack, Sandra, Amber). For some these relationships were particularly important because they perceived their experience at the Community as so unique that sharing it with other people seemed difficult (Sandra).

In general, the predominantly functional role the pilgrims assigned to their organised group suggests that, at least at the outset, they conceived of their pilgrimage experience as essentially an individual journey. Being part of a group pilgrimage was considered an effective practical

strategy to achieve the essential purpose of the travel, which primarily consisted of exploring the self—alone or in dialogue with others. The dominant emphasis on distancing and inner exploration, however, did not exclude on interviewees' part a parallel interest in the relational opportunities provided by the Community's international youth attendance, which in their view represented a critical component of Taizé's uniqueness.

#### 4.7 Explaining Taizé: young people's understandings

When asked to define the Taizé Community and its purpose, interviewees' responses generally reflected the subjective aspirations that had led them to join the pilgrimage. Thus, most interviewees defined Taizé as a space designed for individuals to regain contact with a deeper reality—be that their inner self, God, or both—and find new strength to face everyday life. The Community's ability to constitute such a space was generally connected to a combination of factors: its distance (both physical and symbolic) from the ordinary world, which allowed individuals to temporarily move away from its alienating pressure; its simplified, focused life structure, which suppressed ordinary complexity and centrelessness; its accepting, non-directive ethos and its levelling of hierarchies, which encouraged self-expression and diversity. In the 'neutral territory' thus constituted, interviewees felt able to intensely focus on the existential and spiritual quests that had originally led them to participate in the weekly retreat. In this sense, each interviewee's way of understanding and inhabiting her experience at Taizé was subject-centred and followed a unique personal trajectory. Among the participants, only two defined Taizé in terms related to its ecumenical and ascetic commitment.

Thus, Sandra and Jack described Taizé as a place allowing people to take a distance from their ordinary life and gain a new personal and spiritual centredness. The ideas of distancing and simplification as strategies allowing an intensified focus also dominated Sandra's description of the experience made available by Taizé. In her words, the Community was a place where instead of '*walking*' with God, as she tried to do in her everyday life, she was '*kind of skipping*' to then '*pace it down*' again once back home. She defined the particular spiritual intensity she lived cyclically during her pilgrimages as the '*Taizé spirit*':

Manuela: What is the '*Taizé spirit*'?

Sandra: *Um... like, at home yes, you kind of go to church but you are not sort of, like, kind of... I'll say you, like, this... at home you are kind of walking with God, but in Taizé you're kind of skipping with God, type of thing, 'cos you are really sort of enthused, so you kind of, when you get home you're still kind of skipping, then it kind*

*of slows down a little bit, and then you just pace it down to kind of walking.* (Interview 3, p. 10)

Her summer pilgrimages to Taizé (this was her fifth visit) cyclically allowed her to recharge and prepare for a new year of work as a youth leader.

A similar emphasis on distancing and intensification emerged in Jack's definition of Taizé. Differently from a typical leisure centre, the Community was a place where people could find peace and an accepting, friendly environment. In this unique setting, personal self-expression (*'you can just literally be yourself'*) and spiritual searching (*'you can just become closer to God than you already are'*) could be holistically pursued. Taizé was a space of distancing and quiet regeneration from which Jack could benefit in his grief for the recent loss of a friend and to which he hoped to cyclically return in order to be close to God, find personal renewal, and make *'lifelong friends'*.

Helen's characterisation of Taizé similarly described it as a space of distance and intense spiritual and existential exploration. However, in her view, the Community's most defining aspect was its high acceptance of diversity, which allowed individuals to be authentically themselves. For this reason, she felt that Taizé was a spiritually safe place, the opposite of what she experienced in her father's parish where, as a vicar's daughter, she constantly felt the object of everyone's attention. Differently from there, the crowd gathered to worship at Taizé would not look at her: the only concern she could perceive in this environment was about worshipping God. Pilgrims' rich diversity implied that finally she did not have to worry about her behaviour and her mannerisms, because at Taizé *'everyone is different anyway'*. This sense of safety allowed her to find a temporary relief from her life struggles and enjoy spending time in a quiet, intense personal dialogue with God. Rather than being connected to the Community's ascetic vision, Helen's appropriation of its spirituality of universal acceptance was intimately connected to her this-life oriented quest for peace. Her personal and spiritual journeys were inseparable from each other and intertwined in her aspiration to a different life, a pursuit that oriented her way of understanding and inhabiting Taizé.

The idea of an intimate connection between self-construction and spirituality also oriented Sarah's understanding of the Community's essential purpose. Taizé's distance from ordinary life opened a space where a person could intensely focus both on improving her self-awareness and consolidating her faith. The Community's aim could be described as *'helping you to find yourself... to feel a little bit more comfortable with yourself and your beliefs'*. Taizé's non-

hierarchical and non-directive approach was intentionally designed to encourage young people's free exploration of life and faith issues, especially through small group discussions. A similar understanding of the purpose of Taizé emerged in Roberta's interview. In her interpretation, the Community's defining element was also its high level of acceptance of diversity, which involved an implicit levelling of taken-for-granted hierarchies and values. This encouraged self-expression, both at an existential and spiritual level. In her view, allowing young people to fully explore their self was Taizé's essential purpose:

Manuela: If you had to explain... not necessarily to anyone else, but maybe to yourself, what the Taizé Community is about?

Roberta: *Uh... Taizé is about, I don't know... being together... Uh... Exploring who you are, what you are, being given the space to do that, 'cause you are not forced to be with anybody, if you don't want to be, say, with your small group one afternoon you just tell them you don't wanna be there and they'll leave you be... but equally it's known that there are people there who want to talk to you or who are available to speak to you if you want someone to talk to... it's about... it's about a quality, it's about... yeah... about being responsible for another but yet not ... having the communal sense, but again, you're... you're an individual and not a kind of clone of them, hum... it's about learning and about exchanging cultures as well, and learning how to do things, such as queuing (smiles)... (Interview 2, p. 9)*

[...]

Manuela: Is that something that is connected specifically to Taizé, or something you could find somewhere else?

Roberta: *I think... I think the whole importance of what everyone else is doing, whatever it is, could be just a Taizé thing, because we come from all over the globe and... We weren't told to do the same things, or we had the same reasons... But there is no sense that what one person is doing is more important, and I think if you go somewhere else, then... there is almost a hierarchy of what is important and what's... what's valuable. In some places not doing anything and just sitting still would be seen as 'Oh, you are not doing anything', or... or 'Come and pray', or... 'Do something proactive'. But sometimes sitting and quietly thinking... or just reading a highly secular book is equally valid as reading the Bible or just... just praying.*

Manuela: While here, would you say, there isn't such a hierarchy?

Roberta: *'No, no, the hierarchy isn't here: I mean, you are free to do it, you are free not to do it, it's all... It's all cool and nobody minds... (Interview 2, p. 12)*

In this view, the Community is conceived as a space of self-exploration where people can express themselves in full autonomy, and nothing is expected or required. Interestingly, Roberta generally identifies Taizé with the youth community temporarily gathered on the hill. In the environment thus defined, *'it doesn't matter who you are... what your orientation is... it doesn't matter here'*. This is reflected in the specific image of God Taizé communicates, which is profoundly different from the one conveyed by traditional Churches when they teach that *'there is a right and wrong thing to do'*, and exclude those who do not conform. For Roberta, Taizé's God does not judge, does not reject anyone. His acceptance of all individuals and personal journeys finds expression in the ethos of Taizé's multicultural youth crowd and suggests that *'all is ok with God'* and *'you're going to the same place'*. Differently from outside Taizé, where



external authorities often define one's opinions and choices, at the Community ideas, beliefs, and values are exclusively submitted to an individual's personal validation.

Among all the interviewees, only Debbie and Alex defined Taizé by referring to its historical background and ecumenical vocation. Debbie was among the few who had taken time to browse on the Community's website to learn more about its history and theology before participating in the pilgrimage. To explain the essence of Taizé she quoted a concept expressed by one of the Brothers during a recent meeting:

Manuela: How would you explain what Taizé is about?

Debbie: *Well, I guess something that will stay with me for a long time is, something I can't quite tell precisely, I wish I could, something Brother Paolo shared with us at the British—English—get together on Thursday—yes, it was Thursday. He mentioned that Brother Roger, uh, rode all the way from Switzerland to here and that one of the main influences in his life was his grandmother, and she had made the claim that if the Church had been more united, had there been good solidarity amongst its members, then perhaps the two last World Wars would not have happened. And, I guess, that just has been running through my mind for the last while. If you consider that, and then Brother Roger did found Taizé with his grandmother's lesson in the back of his mind, and was endeavouring bringing reconciliation among Churches, what Taizé is for me is learning to dialogue amongst different denominations and learn to relate to people with differing beliefs, and to learn what we have in common and what we can move forward with and, if you think about it... uh... all Christians... uh... going back, going back to the word I shared earlier, on love. All Christians do share that common bond, love of God and seeking after him, and if we can keep our focus on that instead of on what divides us, I think we could be a lot further ahead, and I think the Church can have a visible impact in the future and maybe, I don't know, we can prevent wars, uh... So for me, uh, Taizé is just an inspiration and also a challenge to be courageous and reach across, uh, artificial boundaries, uh, and to just seek, and to build community with others and, uh, to realize, how, how we really are... and that's all. (Interview 4, p. 8)*

Consistent with the objective emphasis of her Mennonite faith, Debbie identified Taizé with its intended vision. However, as shown by her motivations to join the pilgrimage, which I reported earlier, this perspective did not exclude a more subjective appropriation of the Community, on her part, as the vehicle of a search for personal healing and re-centring after a time of family struggle.

Alex was participating for the fifth time in an event promoted by Taizé. He considered himself as a 'Taizé-believing Christian'. For him the Community's vision was a way of life rather than a theory, and he had adopted it as his personal calling. He interpreted the Community's goal as extending Brother Roger's vision and building a better world. Taizé's immediate purpose was not to abolish existing denominations but to act as a unifying umbrella:

Alex: *Taizé, for me, is all about thinking outside of the box and look... and sometimes reversing the way of thinking and seeing... um... seeing what you have in common, in unity, rather than the divisions... the divisions of our lives... You know, Taizé is never going to replace Churches worldwide, 'cause people will always feel more comfortable with going to their own denomination, but Taizé is something outside, that encompasses that all, like an umbrella which everybody can meet under so that*

*people can look at what they have in common and what they've done, and once they start to see the positives, they'll see less of a need to go into the details of the segregations within Churches, and will also be able to expand that common understanding within Christianity...* (Interview 6, p. 16)

For Alex Taizé represented a '*miniature model*' of a transformative project promoting reciprocal understanding, forgiveness, and acceptance as means to advance world peace and justice. To realise this vision, Christians needed to live their faith authentically and acknowledge their responsibility in helping others. However, the Community's ultimate horizon pointed out to the disappearance of organised Churches and hierarchical ecclesial authorities:

*Alex: For me Taizé is about educating people, freeing them, allowing them to open and receive the Spirit of God, and when they receive the Spirit of God in their life, you know, that guides their thoughts and their actions, they shouldn't need anybody telling them what they should or shouldn't do because the Spirit of God is something for me that doesn't change, it can't change, it's your religion and your faith, you know... I mean... Your religion and your culture, you know, economics, politics, you know, that all... that all is man-made, you know, socially constructed, whereas the Spirit of God can't change... If you have the Spirit of God in you, you will know right from wrong, you will know how to act and it's about connecting people's spirituality with their inner being... and it's through that... that guides them, it's not through something like... an odd way, you have to do this, you have to do that... The Spirit of God guides you, and this is why I feel that these people come here freely and they can feel it... It connects us as human beings with the Spirit of God and allowing that to influence us in terms of the decisions and actions that we make, the way you'll model peace and harmony and justice for all... So... that's kind of what Taizé means to me.* (Interview 6, p. 17)

The axis of Alex's reading of Taizé was the idea of the unifying influence of the Spirit, whose role he also emphasised in his description of his home congregation (see 4.4). In relation to Taizé, this implied that pilgrims did not need to be taught by external authorities about '*what they should or shouldn't do*', as all institutions (including Churches) are '*man-made, socially constructed*'. The Community's task was to enable individuals to receive their guidance directly from the Spirit, whose influence could unite and lead them to pursue justice and peace. To achieve this aim, Taizé oriented young people towards the reading of the Scriptures as a way to understand the issues affecting the world and the necessity to pray and act for change. Strategies such as distancing and simplification were also designed to help people focus on the Community's vision of brotherhood and justice. The spiritual effectiveness of this environment had kept Alex cyclically returning to Taizé. Participating in these pilgrimages allowed him to better know God, refocus on the Community's mission, and meet people who shared the same commitment.

Alex's appropriation of Taizé's theology diverged from it in significant ways, particularly in his dominant emphasis on the role of the Spirit as mark of true faith and exclusive guide of individuals' autonomous conscience, in his rejection of external spiritual authorities, and in the

idea of institutional religion as a mere social construction. The Community's vision of justice and universal brotherhood had become a narrative within which he could inscribe his strong personal sense of election. In this sense, his cyclical visits to the Community worked as a form of validation of his calling as transformative agent.

By highlighting interviewees' understandings of the Community's nature and purpose, this section showed Taizé's pilgrimages as an arena of diverging interpretations that predominantly reflected the intertwined nature of young people's existential and spiritual explorations. In the next sections, I will proceed to further illustrate this point by analysing how young people concretely inhabited and interpreted some key expressions of Taizé's mediation.

## **4.8 Experiencing Taizé's retreats**

### **4.8.1 Catechesis at the Community: 'Bible Introductions' and 'Small Groups'**

As anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, in the next sections I will focus on young people's interpretations of two key expressions of the Community's theological mediation: its 'Bible introductions', with their related small discussion groups, and its daily communal prayers. Bible introductions, the main vehicle of Taizé's catechesis, constituted one of the most marginal aspects in the interviewees' pilgrimage experience. While all had attended these presentations as part of their weekly retreat, only three referred to them—with varying degrees of appreciation. Among them was Sandra, a Sunday school teacher and youth worker in her Methodist congregation, who took note of the presentations to share them with her church and her friends. Amber, who had recently started attending a series of study sessions on the doctrinal roots of her faith at her local church, particularly appreciated the Brother's humorous attitude in his presentations on the Gospel of John, which she carefully noted. Roberta considered these lectures as helpful but not always able to connect with her interests. What she found particularly meaningful in the Community's catechesis was the feeling of being surrounded by so many young people coming from different life trajectories, all trying to find spiritual intimations in the Bible. It was the diversity and yet the sense of togetherness that Roberta felt while listening with the 'youth community' of Taizé that made those moments meaningful to her; they validated her individual quest and made her feel part of a bigger whole. On the contrary, for most interviewees (Roberta, Sandra, Amber, Jack, Alex, Sarah) the 'small groups' designed to discuss the morning presentations constituted one of the most meaningful

aspects of their week at Taizé. The reasons they provided to justify this choice paint a complex and contested picture of small groups' role in young people's experience. A first element emerging from a majority of interviews (Roberta, Sandra, Amber, Jack, Alex, Sarah) was the flexibility with which interviewees and their groups utilised this space. As highlighted by Amber, generally her group ended up not speaking about the assigned Bible passage but rather about young people's personal experiences and faith. This pattern of appropriation was not an isolated case. Jack's group worked in a similar way: after having cursorily covered the daily discussion outline assigned by the Brothers, young people generally spent their time playing games, which helped them *'to get to know each other... and glue the group together'*.

In Sarah's view, the discussion outlines provided by the Brothers were a mere starter designed to achieve the actual purpose of the small groups: helping young people finding an answer to the personal and spiritual quests they carried within themselves. As a leader of one of these groups, she understood that her main responsibility was to create an inclusive atmosphere and allow young people to open up about the things that really mattered to them, things they would not normally share with strangers. Thus, if young people initially tried to *'feel the water'*, by the end of the week they were able to express themselves in full confidence. In Sarah's view, the short time available stimulated openness and self-expression, in a process where the other became a partner in finding solutions for things *'you'd like resolved'*:

Manuela: Is this something that you can also have back home?

Sarah: *Uh... yes, yes, but I think it would take a lot longer back home... I think, the fact that you know that you only have got seven days here, and you come to Taizé with things that you were thinking about, things that you'd like resolved, and you know that by the end of week, if you don't talk about them, they're not gonna be resolved...(chuckles)... So I think having that time limit makes you hurry things up a bit, and makes you put a lot more effort into it as well, and... Especially since you don't know that many people here and stuff... you... yeah, you just put a lot more effort into trying to talk to the people, and get to know them a bit more... yeah...*  
(Interview 8, p. 7)

These small communities constituted for many of the interviewees the primary venue where they could access others and find a space to express their questions, articulate self-narratives and test their views on life and faith issues (Sandra, Amber, Sarah). They provided emotional support (Amber) and true friendship (Jack), confirmed the plausibility of young people's personal ideas and beliefs (Alex, Sarah), and offered validation for their personal journeys through doubt, fragility and questioning (Amber, Sarah). While the Brothers invited young people to use specifically designed question outlines to discuss the topic of the daily Bible introduction, young people appropriated this space of encounter as an opportunity of self-

expression and mutual exchange, which was generally seen as the main objective of a small group. Like Sarah, Amber also emphasised her groups' rapid ability to open up and not '*hold back on anything*'. The holistic character of these discussions, as opposed to the Bible-centred focus proposed by the Brothers, is well illustrated by a passage of her interview:

Manuela: Do you mostly discuss subjects raised in the Bible introductions, or anything else?

Amber: *No... I mean, the first couple of days we didn't even touch upon what was in the Bible introduction at all.... Um... In fact, say, someone said something about someone who had said to them that your life is like a room... a house with three rooms: a physical room, a spiritual room, and a mental room, and you should try and visit each room every day. And we started talking about how we... do each room, and how sometimes they overlap... Some people thought... quite a lot of people found that, say, when they were going running or something... it was a good time to be thinking... or that she'd pray more than running... or something... um... So we kind of had that discussion first, and did something else the next day. And then we did a little exercise that myself and [name] had done at school, um.... It's an exercise in listening to God while you trace your handprint... You write in it very faintly on the back of the paper so you can't see it through and you just let everybody's... handprints out in the middle of the room and if you feel like you've been drawn to write something on somebody's handprint you do, and it's amazing the sort of things you... you sort of get back at the end, how... true... they ring... um... So we did that... We have talked a little bit about some of the stuff in the Bible introductions, occasionally (smiles), um... Today we've talked about death and love... So, two quite difficult topics to talk about (smiles)... um, did kind of coincide with the Bible introduction, somehow (chuckles)... um... so we got onto the topic a little bit today... um... but we also, um... I don't know if it was her idea or if she got it from somewhere else, but our contact person suggested that we try almost our own version of... um... Brother Alois' letter from China... So we're writing a letter of encouragement for someone else in the group, we don't know who will get it... um... but we're each writing a letter to someone... um... and we're going to exchange letters tomorrow, so... I could get a letter from anyone tomorrow and have something to take away from my group. (Interview 5, p. 11)*

Amber and her friends not only inhabited the space of these discussions as a vehicle for holistic explorations and reciprocal support, they also creatively subverted the official 'form' of the Taizé letter, by which the Community's Prior communicates the spiritual theme for the year, to exchange letters intended to accompany each other's existential and spiritual journey. As for Amber and Sarah, for Alex the key characteristics of small groups were authenticity, acceptance of each other's diversity, and a climate allowing everyone to be '*able to be yourself*'. It was, in fact, through the rich diversity of everyone's expressions that people could learn and be enriched (Amber, Alex). Participants generally managed small group time autonomously and often totally redesigned it to fit self-expressive purposes (Roberta, Sandra, Amber, Jack, Alex, Sarah). As a result of these dynamics, young people often considered these groups as their basic community at Taizé, a space they built together while their journeys temporarily intersected (Amber, Jack, Alex, Sarah). Everyone came to Taizé to follow a personal trajectory; the space of the small groups clearly constituted a place where questions, doubts, and ideas

could be voiced, mirrored in the others, shared and validated in an environment of mutual acceptance of everyone's diversity. In this context, the real destination of young people's pilgrimage became their true self. Along this personal and spiritual journey, everyone could become a partner and have something important to bring (Amber, Jack, Alex, Sarah). This intersecting of trajectories found its essential condition in the temporary character of these relationships between 'strangers', which guaranteed pilgrims' expressive freedom and ability to explore alternative selves. Despite their intensity, these exchanges were usually confined to the limited space of these retreats. Few planned to meet outside Taizé; the main form of continuity for these relationships was exchanging Facebook contact details or, more rarely (as it implied a more personal commitment), an email address or phone number.

In conclusion, interviews evidenced how, in the case of Taizé's Bible introductions and small groups, the theological meanings mediated by the institution had to compete with young people's subject-centred appropriation. This was particularly evident in the marginal significance attributed to the formal catechesis of the Bible introductions and in young people's emphasis on the importance of peer exchanges in the small groups. In this context, rather than being focused on the Community's ecumenical mission and its demands of ascetic commitment, young people's concerns concentrated on building a more aware and integrated self—a journey which holistically included existential questions, emotional struggles, relational explorations, and spiritual searching, and on whose path accessing others' experiences was valued as a most precious resource.

#### **4.8.2 Communal prayers**

Communal prayers are the structuring axis of life at Taizé and the chief expression of its theological mediation. As explained in the first part of this chapter (4.3), they take place three times a day and constitute the centre around which pilgrims' daily schedule is organised. Given their significance, it was not surprising to find out that a majority of interviewees assigned them a major role in their experience. As already seen for small groups, young people inhabited this space very differently, depending to their individual journey.

A first element highlighted by the interviewees was the sense of structure the three daily communal prayers provided for their life at Taizé. Some particularly appreciated starting and closing the day with a time of corporate worship (Helen, Roberta, Debbie, Jack, Sarah). This was especially true in the case of the longer evening prayers (Roberta, Sandra, Debbie, Jack), as they flow into song vigils during which young people continue sitting in the church, in groups

or alone. For Sandra, that was her favourite moment of the day because it came after dinner, when her British group met after a long day. They could sit together in the Church of Reconciliation, taking in the atmosphere, the silence, and the music, or occasionally talking to a Brother in private. Like her, Amber loved spending late evenings at the church with her small group friends, sitting behind the crowd and singing together during the vigil. For Roberta sometimes it was enough just to stay outside the church and listen. The sounds coming from the people gathered in worship gave her the feeling of being part of something greater than herself. This feeling was also the reason why she loved any time of her day at Taizé—morning or evening prayers, but also working with others, eating her meals with friends, or simply having fun with them. In her view, there was a sort of ‘timelessness’ in those moments, which did not necessarily relate specifically to Taizé but, rather, to the presence of so many voices and languages surrounding her.

Jack, who came from a small parish, was particularly impressed by the contrast between the massive attendance of Taizé’s worship services and the small size of his home congregation:

*Jack: At home, Taizé services were really attended only by a small congregation, but I walked in Taizé’s church on Sunday—I was about five minutes late as I was helping people putting tents up and stuff, so I was unfortunately right at the back—but I walked in and there were four, five thousand people, all in the same church singing the same thing and... I just caught my breath and I said ‘wow’... You know, just seeing that sight is really amazing, like... a huge number of people, all there for the same reason, it’s quite overwhelming actually, for your first time... ‘cos the Taizé experience I had had from back home, up in [place], it was a small congregation of fifteen, maybe twenty people... but walking into a church full to... practically bursting, it’s... it was really overwhelming... quite a shock to the system, actually.*

Manuela: What ‘system’?

*Jack: My old system of a congregation, you know, the church back home for me is primarily an elderly congregation, thirty maybe forty at the best of times and... like, four thousand to five thousand people compared to a forty congregation is... it was quite a shock... it woke me up, so to speak, really, to the Taizé experience... (Interview 7, p. 5)*

For Jack, who came from a small and ageing congregation and often felt ridiculed in his attempts at sharing his Christian beliefs with friends, the image of the youth crowd gathered in worship at Taizé truly represented ‘a shock’ which added plausibility to his faith. Like him, Sarah—also isolated in her local context and in search of opportunities to extend her network of Christian friends—highlighted the difference between the small Taizé-style services she attended at home and communal prayers at the Community:

*Sarah: Here I find it much better, much more of an atmosphere... Here, I think, it’s much more the people that make it, in fact it’s the whole experience here... you know, you go to other Christian events they put on, and there’d be somebody preaching, there’d be these bands, you know, it’d be very much they are there to entertain you and you go more as a spectator... but generally everything with Taizé I’ve found it’s... it’s... the large number of people in the church, that sense of unity between*

*everybody, and... that's... And with the Taizé services at home, you know, it's quite nice to sing the chants and stuff, but I don't really make that connection about everybody being united and praying for one... um... praying as one... and, yeah... it was just a small number of people in the church and they don't have that much of a personal significance... (Interview 8, pp. 5-6)*

In Sarah's view, the great number of attendees definitely contributed to making the experience of worshipping at Taizé unique and significant. In the synchronicity of the singing, she felt at the same time one with the others and yet individually involved, not a mere spectator. Debbie expressed similar views from the perspective of her Mennonite heritage. During communal prayers, she loved sitting in silence, as the simple idea of being surrounded by so many people in prayer and of God listening to them was overwhelming. This experience was very different from her Mennonite congregation's way of worshipping, which was characterised by simplicity and loud prayer. And yet, while silently praying with the youth crowd at Taizé, she felt free to be herself and at the same time deeply aware of human beings' fragility. In those moments of communal prayer, she felt that *'life is not all about me... there is a Creator who made this world... and it's huge'*. Being part of that multitude helped her to recover a better sense of perspective about this world and, at the same time, gave her an intuition of the future described in Revelation, where *'the voices of the saints are like the sound of many waters'*. Her thought at the sight of the crowd gathered in prayer at Taizé was: *'This must be a little what heaven is like'*. While most interviewees' comments focused on the impact of the multitude gathered in worship, two other aspects also emerged as important. The first was related to the times of silence included as part of the worship service (Roberta, Debbie, Sandra, Amber, Jack). Jack thought that those moments of silence made him feel closer to God than his vicar's sermons at his parish, during which most people appeared to be dozing. During his experience at Taizé, silence had allowed him to lose himself in his prayers and thoughts, which he had felt as extremely helpful. Silence, more than words, played a major role in Jack's faith. Sandra also contrasted *'praising God'* at her Methodist congregation with Taizé's worship, as she felt that silence was more helpful to her than *'singing and clapping hands'*. During those quiet moments, in fact, she would just empty her mind and concentrate on praying and speaking to God as if he was an actual person. This time of suspending her everyday concerns helped her to maintain her spiritual focus. Similarly to her, Amber found this temporary silencing of her everyday *'background noise'* at the same challenging and most helpful. As a naturally anxious person, she initially did not know what to do with silence, but as the week progressed she learned to become quiet inside herself. During those moments, she tried to deal with her many anxieties



and to 'sort things out' in dialogue with her feelings and with God. In this sense, silence had a therapeutic function, as it helped Amber recovering contact with herself, both personally and spiritually:

*Amber: You know, at times when I'm, just like, by myself at home, I generally like something going on in the background, whether, you know, it'd just be, like, while I'm puttering around, some music or television on in the background, I liked the background noise that... while I was at home... and I found out actually that I'm a lot more comfortable with the silence at home if I haven't got anything going on... it would be... it might be... just because I'm reading a book or something and I'm so absorbed I don't really care, but I'm still doing something, I'm not just sat [sitting]... just letting, sort of, the silence do its work, almost... which is what I found here, the silence actually does a lot of work and... um... yeah, I think that's something I'm definitely gonna be taking home with me... being more comfortable in my own company. I think it's probably why I avoided it, I wasn't always necessarily comfortable in my own company, and... I've... I've learned to be... (Interview 5, p. 8)*

A similar search for a space to recover contact with the self and God emerged in comments related to a second element perceived as especially significant in Taizé's communal prayers, the singing. This was particularly evident in Roberta's comments, for whom listening to singing during the Community's prayers functioned similarly to playing music on her iPod while having walks at home: both practices helped her to carve out a space of spiritual connection. For Amber songs were primarily connected with the emotional aspect of worshipping. Singing in languages she could not understand allowed her to better feel the emotions behind the music, which she considered more significant than the words. In Jack's view, it was the repetitive nature of Taizé's singing that made communal prayers unique. Rather than singing being conceived as a mechanical task, as in his parish's worship, at the Community it was like an extended, repetitive prayer. That sung praying was his way of expressing his love for God. Sandra simply took in the music while silently reading and meditating on the lyrics, so that she could concentrate on their meaning.

Not all interviewees, however, found communal prayers equally valuable. For Alex the primary goal of his retreats at Taizé was meeting other people who shared his same spiritual commitment to Taizé's vision, and he dedicated most of his time to this occupation. Communal prayers initially helped Sandra bring to the surface the issues she carried within her. However, after the first couple of days, she started finding prayer services repetitive and decided to skip them. When she attended, she generally occupied her time with journaling, as the music and the atmosphere created a space where she could 'consolidate' her thoughts.

In summary, despite the individual diversity of interviewees' journeys, a few elements emerged as particularly significant in their participation in Taizé's communal prayers. The first was related

to being part of a crowd of thousands gathered in worship. Being immersed physically—or even sonically from a distance—in a multitude of young people singing in unison impressed interviewees with the sense of being part of a greater movement involving other spiritual travellers and implicitly suggested feelings of transcendence and togetherness. Particularly for those involved in small congregations and struggling to affirm the plausibility of their beliefs among non-Christian friends, participating in such gatherings constituted a powerful confirmation of their faith. A second element emerging from the data was the significance of silence as a liturgical component. In interviewees' experience, quiet meditation carved out an individual space that balanced the collective emphasis of the liturgy. Silence was experienced as a breaking of the pressure of temporality, a provisional suspension of everyday concerns. Young people appropriated this liminal space as a meditative vehicle, allowing them to engage in an individual dialogue with God. For some this temporary liminality also had a therapeutic function, as it dissipated anxiety and helped recovering a contact with the self. Finally, the findings also highlighted the significance of music in participants' worship experience. More than other elements, however, music was appropriated in a variety of highly individual ways, depending on interviewees' personal journeys: as a distancing device to create a meditative space, as a form of contemplative prayer, as an emotional expression of worship, or as a mere canopy for personal reflection. It is also important to note that some interviewees did not particularly value Taizé's communal prayers. This happened either because these participants prioritised direct interpersonal exchanges or because over the course of the week they had started perceiving them as too repetitive. To conclude, while it seems clear that the synchronicity of corporate singing mediated a feeling of spiritual and affective unity among the participants, it also appears evident that interviewees did not inscribe that momentary experience of communion within the Community's vision of a reconciled Christianity. In the highly accepting and diverse environment of Taizé, this sense of togetherness was, instead, interpreted by young people as a general feeling of being involved in a common spiritual and existential search. In this perspective, silence and music were inhabited and adapted as vessels of a highly individual journey, which remained the true centre of young people's pilgrimage – be its destination the self, God, or more frequently, both.

#### 4.9 Taizé after Taizé: shopping at the Community's warehouse

As illustrated in my analysis of Brother Roger's theology, the Community's enactment of its parable of community sought to involve young people as partners of a '*joint undertaking*' (Brother John 2006), agents of reconciliation within the Church and in society. In the vision of the founder of Taizé, the ascetic spirituality and ecumenical communion pilgrims experienced during their visits were intended to be transformative and to act well beyond the space of a weekly retreat. Therefore, to complete my empirical analysis of Taizé pilgrimages as arena of diverging interpretations, in this section I will reconstruct young people's perspectives on the significance of their experience in light of their return to ordinary life.

When reflecting on the perspective of their return home and on the possible influence of their pilgrimage experience, interviewees (Helen, Sandra, Debbie, Amber, Jack, Sarah) predominantly emphasised the radical distance between life as structured at Taizé and their everyday reality. For this reason, they generally considered it impossible to sustain the spiritual intensity they experienced at the Community. Thus, in Helen's opinion, the intense contact with God she had built at Taizé was going to be very difficult to maintain at home. The week spent at the Community had made this intensity possible because she had no alternative way of spending her time. Similarly to her, for Amber maintaining a daily routine of prayer and silence was simple at Taizé but impossible in her everyday life. Sandra, who was on her fifth pilgrimage to the Community, knew this transition well:

*Sandra: When you come back from Taizé you're all kind in a Taizé spirit, but that kind of calms down after a few weeks. You're kind of 'Well, right, I'm not going to pray three times every day until next summer'. So you just kind of come back to the normal routine. So that's a bit, kind of like, you leave a bit of that Taizé spirit, I must admit... (Interview 3, p. 11)*

Despite her good intentions, in previous years her plans to graft elements of Taizé's structured, intense spirituality onto her ordinary life had regularly failed. In some cases, the perspective of leaving Taizé's suspended space caused interviewees to contemplate their return to everyday life with fear. Helen knew that once back to her reality as a vicar's daughter, she would have to face the same issues. Going back was something she did not feel ready to do. Roberta felt that her week at Taizé had contributed to accentuate her sense of alienation from the narrow-mindedness of the '*little places*' where she lived her ordinary life.

If Taizé's attempts at restructuring life around a spiritual centre were usually perceived as inapplicable outside its unique environment, interviewees' most frequent response to their

pilgrimage experience was to ex-corporate single elements from the Community's warehouse of rituals, symbols and practices, and creatively weave them into the fabric of their ordinary lives. Thus, for some of them (Roberta, Sandra, Debbie, Alex, Jack) attending or starting a local Taizé-style worship service was a way of giving their experience some form of continuity; participating in these liturgies became part of a repertoire of options by which they composed the customised patchwork of their spiritual life. Given the abundance of resources sold by the Community (music CDs, songbooks, collections of prayers, icons of different sizes, posters, candles, candleholders, and prayer stools), the Community itself seemed to intentionally encourage individual appropriation. Sandra's comments exemplify interviewees' approach:

*Sandra: I bought a CD this year... um... I bought a CD last year, but it was a gift. But I bought one for me this year... so I hope it can help me having that silence and Taizé-style worship with friends, get some people from my university and... and have some Taizé... Taizé 'fun'... (smiles).*

Manuela: So for your Taizé-style liturgies you would basically use the CDs? Anything else?

*Sandra: Yeah... yeah... I think I would have, like, the Taizé music on, some silence, um... reading... and... yeah, that would be it, like, singing and... and then, some hot chocolate, too... just to... to be in the mood... (Interview 3, p. 12)*

In Jack's case, too, starting a weekly Taizé-style service was his way of importing part of that experience in his ordinary life. Before his pilgrimage, he frequently spent time in silence and prayer; Taizé's liturgy, with its emphasis on silence, individual prayer, and repetitive chanting, represented a fitting option in the customised design of his personal spiritual life. Like Sandra, Jack did some shopping at the Community's store: he bought a songbook and a typical Taizé stool to use during his prayers, a replica of those the Brothers used during communal prayers. Rather than attending or creating an entire Taizé-style service, some interviewees selected one or more specific elements characterising the Community's spirituality to make them part of their private spiritual bricolage. Thus, to include some '*Taizé stuff*' in her spiritual practice, Sarah bought a few items to recreate its aesthetic atmosphere:

*Sarah: I bought some... a lovely candle, and a lovely holder and... I'm gonna try... and... because I have small groups at home with my church and we take it in turns to meet at each other's houses, so I'm gonna incorporate my candle into that, and then... I bought a Taizé CD, so I'm gonna have the chants playing and the... Taizé songbook as well... yeah, I don't imagine I'd like to do so much Taizé stuff but I think it's a nice atmosphere...*

Manuela: So you'd use those elements to create an atmosphere?

Sarah: Yeah...

Manuela: You would use the candles for that purpose... would that be a decoration?

*Sarah: Um... to focus... to be a focus during prayer... just because I like looking at the flickering of the candle... (Interview 8, p. 12)*

A similar dynamic of selective ex-corporation and re-appropriation could also be seen at work in Sandra's way of imagining a possible continuity between her time at Taizé and her life

at home. While she considered sitting to pray three times a day as simply inconceivable, she intended to appropriate elements such as the practice of silence, sitting still to listen, as well as the use of music—be that of Taizé or just *'normal music'*—as vehicles of reflection and prayer. Helen also planned to use some Taizé's liturgical materials to create a prayer corner in her room that would encourage her to pray and avoid distractions, something she could keep in a cupboard and pull out whenever she wanted. Some interviewees (Roberta, Sandra, Amber, Jack, Alex) intended to wear a little necklace with a Taizé cross or biblical symbol to remember the experience (*'a souvenir of what I've been through, a remembrance that this place still exists, I suppose'*, in Roberta's words). In all of these cases, elements of Taizé's mediation were separated from their embedded theological meanings and creatively appropriated as part of young people's personalised spiritual patchwork.

Theological ideas were subjected to a similar selective appropriation. Roberta's time at Taizé left her with the idea of a benign and totally accepting God, very different from the image used by Churches to manipulate people and make them *'fill the party line'*. Her experience there taught her to wait for God and trust that he would guide her in mysterious but benevolent ways. Finally, at Taizé Roberta also appreciated the value of respecting others independently from their background and way of being, as *'we are all the same'*. Sarah similarly valued Taizé's emphasis on acceptance (*'it's ok to be different... nobody is perfect, it's just ok to be yourself'*). In Debbie's view, Taizé reinforced her awareness of the importance of studying the Bible and promoting ecumenical reconciliation, although she considered these teachings to be mostly a confirmation of core Mennonite beliefs (*'We are a "peace" Church and we are very interested in reconciliation ourselves'*). In her everyday life, Amber often fought with feelings of low self-esteem and anxiety; the time spent in silence and meditation at the Community did much, in her view, to improve her dialogue with God and her personal sense of acceptance. What she drew from Taizé was an appetite for spending more time in quiet reflection and the idea of being less concerned about material things.

Finally, a different case was represented by Alex's experience, a regular participant in Taizé's European meetings and summer retreats who identified himself as a *'Taizé-believing Christian'*. His experiences at Taizé validated his personal sense of being called to *'make the world a better place'*. Alongside other inspirational leaders such as Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and Desmond Tutu, Brother Roger constituted a model for his life. As for the founder of Taizé, Alex's understanding of peace and reconciliation was strictly relational and individual-focused.

This implied a rejection of any involvement in politics and an emphasis on the presence of the Spirit in each individual, against the segregation promoted by religious denominations. His pilgrimages to Taizé strengthened his sense of calling as an agent of change and renewed his conviction that the world could be '*a different place*'. Rather than recognising and embracing the Community as an absolute authority, however, Alex's continued commitment to Taizé was submitted to his subjective validation. An important aim of his participation in the Community's European meetings was, in fact, to check to what extent its vision could '*work*' in different cultural contexts and if there was something about Taizé he had naively misinterpreted. For this reason, he intended to start reading some books on the Community's history and theology to make sure it was '*not sort of going off on a tangent*'.

In summary, some findings clearly emerged from the analysis of the data. The first was related to the nature of young people's appropriation of their pilgrimage experience, which they predominantly interpreted as a subject-centred, private transition of intense spiritual and existential mobility. Taizé's highly accepting, non-directive, and subjectively oriented spirituality was thus inhabited as an ideal canopy for these individual journeys. What appeared as largely marginal in young people's appropriation of their pilgrimage experience was the perspective of a focus other than the self. In this framework, the horizon of ascetic commitment to Christian and human reconciliation that constituted the core of Brother Roger's vision was replaced by a holistic emphasis on self-construction, which in some cases also involved a therapeutic dimension. As highlighted above, interviewees understood their pilgrimage to Taizé as a particularly *intense* transition, in which the spiritual, the existential, and the relational were closely interconnected. In their view, this intensity was related to the specific strategies of distancing, simplification, and re-centring the Community utilised to stage its prophetic parable. For participants, however, Taizé's liminal, restructured environment also constituted the main limitation of their pilgrimage experience, as the spiritual intensity it fostered was seen as incompatible with the disordered complexity of everyday life. Going on a pilgrimage to Taizé was, therefore, generally understood as a temporary, subject-focused transition allowing individuals to cyclically restore the self, in all its dimensions, from the alienating labour of existence. In this perspective, young people's 'shopping' at the Community's store could be understood as an ex-corporation strategy aimed at piecing together personal canopies (with music, candles, prayer stools, etc.) that reproduced, at least in part, the reflexive structure experienced at Taizé. The purpose of this form of appropriation was to create a liminal structure

in the midst of ordinary life, a space where youth could pursue their ongoing spiritual and personal reflexive work. A similar subject-centred dynamic of ex-corporation also emerged in young people's interpretation of the theological meanings underlying Taizé's mediation. These were, in fact, predominantly understood and appropriated in light of the individual trajectory that had initially led interviewees to participate in the pilgrimage. For Roberta, whose faith incorporated beliefs from different world religions, her pilgrimage experience strengthened not only her belief in a universally accepting God but also her sense of alienation from the normative restrictions of institutional religion; Debbie found validation for beliefs that were already part of her Mennonite heritage, such as the importance of Bible study and reconciliation; Amber, who struggled with her self-esteem and valued the emotional support provided by Christian spirituality and fellowship, gave special emphasis to the therapeutic dimension of her experience. Based on this picture, it is possible to argue that in the non-directive, highly accepting, and diverse environment of Taizé participants generally seemed to find what they were already looking for.

In conclusion, interviewees' comments highlighted how Taizé constituted an open warehouse of theological ideas, symbols, rituals, and practices from which they freely ex-corporated materials to use as temporary or permanent elements in their individual spiritual constructions. While the theology embedded in the Community's expressions was often superficially known or totally ignored, the interviewees used the spiritual structure provided by Taizé as a vessel they creatively appropriated, guided by the compass of their subject-centred, holistically oriented explorations.

## Chapter 5 – Taizé youth pilgrimages: an arena of competing interpretations?

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, my research focus shifted from the reconstruction of the theology underlying the Community's ministry to the study of its actual practice as expressed in its youth pilgrimages. Through the use of empirical methods, I composed a thick description of this phenomenon, which revealed important findings. These pointed to a complex interplay of competing interpretations intersecting in the arena of Taizé's youth pilgrimages. At a basic level, it was possible to observe that the Community adopted strategies of distancing, levelling, and re-centring to stage an ecumenical parable of communion and invite young people to become partners in a *'joint undertaking'* (Brother John 2006: 147). However, the research also highlighted that Church of England leaders primarily appropriated these pilgrimages as a resource to support youth ministry at a local level. From their perspective, a pilgrimage to Taizé essentially constituted an opportunity to aggregate Anglican young people and their friends. The main value of these programmes consisted in providing youth with a structured space where they could periodically recover their spiritual focus, acquire a new sense of plausibility for their faith, and find an international network of Christian friends in a benevolently controlled, yet highly accepting, environment. The main purpose of this form of appropriation was, therefore, youth retention. On the part of youth leaders, this implied that the intended ecumenical aim of these weekly retreats was only given marginal explicit consideration. Moving to the participants' level, my empirical findings revealed that their understanding of their pilgrimage experience also significantly diverged from Taizé's intended meanings. Interviewees generally interpreted their pilgrimage from a subject-centred perspective, as an opportunity to *'get away from their life'* for some time and recover an inner balance that holistically included existential, spiritual, emotional, and relational dimensions. Most participants inhabited the structure created by the Taizé Community as a hospitable canopy allowing them to focus intensely on their self-constructive journeys, individually or by taking advantage of the intersubjective resources of other youth involved in similar explorations. The Community's subjectively oriented spirituality was thus appropriated as the vehicle of a pilgrimage whose destination was a more integrated, renewed self, not an ecumenical vision of unity. This reading was further confirmed by young



people's patterns of appropriation in light of their return, which predominantly focused on manufacturing at home a spiritual vehicle reproducing, at least in part, the reflexive structure they had experienced during the pilgrimage. A similar subject-centred perspective also emerged in interviewees' appropriation of theological ideas, which focused on ex-corporating those elements that intersected and validated their self-constructive trajectory. In summary, the empirical description provided in the previous chapter yielded significant elements confirming my research hypothesis. Based on these findings the Taizé Community emerged as being an arena of interaction between sometimes significantly divergent theological interpretations. Participants predominantly appropriated their pilgrimage experience as a vessel of a subject-centred, holistically oriented journey, an interpretation that represented a significant departure from the perspective of ascetic commitment to ecumenical unity mediated in the Community's expressions.

The findings highlighted by this empirical analysis present significant affinities with other studies focusing on contemporary pilgrimages. As suggested by Swinton's practical theological methodology (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94-96), in this chapter I will make use of the insights of a discipline closely related to my research subject, pilgrimage studies. Situating my findings within the theoretical map of pilgrimage research will contribute to illuminate further the trends affecting the phenomena under study.

The last three decades have witnessed a constant increase in the popularity of pilgrimages, which has attracted increasing attention on the part of scholarly research (Reader 2007; Stausberg 2011: 55-59, 59-64; Reader 2014: 18-19; Jansen and Notermans 2012: 1-5; Coleman and Eade 2004; Eade and Sallnow 2000). This growth has been connected to a multiplicity of factors, some of which can be seen at work in determining the success of the Taizé Community. Among the contributing elements, a decisive role has been played, for instance, by the growing accessibility of travel opportunities. This has generally increased pilgrim numbers internationally and, in some cases, considerably changed the nature of the pilgrimage experience by blurring the boundaries between religious and leisure travel (Reader 2007; 2014: 56, 94-96, 105). Given the demographic profile of Taizé's pilgrims, the increasing availability of low-priced travel options, combined with the inexpensiveness of the Community's weekly fee, have certainly acted as a powerful incentive, particularly for young people coming from former Communist countries. Scholars have also pointed out the promotional role of traditional religious institutions as a decisive factor in determining the contemporary popularity

of pilgrimages (Harris 1999; Harris 2013; Eade and Sallnow 2000: 30-50; Frey 1998; Reader 2007; Margry 2008: 15). As confirmed by the case of Taizé, pilgrimages do not develop as spontaneous phenomena resulting from pilgrims voting '*with their feet*' (Turner and Turner 1978: 25). Their relationship with religious authorities is complex and nuanced, not purely anti-hierarchical and anti-structural, as argued by Turner (Turner 1969, 1974a, 1974b; Turner and Turner 1978). As demonstrated by recent scholarship, it is not infrequent to observe traditional Churches actively promoting existing shrines or even creating new forms of pilgrimage as a means to fight secularising trends and membership decline.<sup>108</sup> Thus, in some cases, phenomena previously frowned upon by religious authorities have been incorporated among the resources by which Churches respond to issues such as decreasing attendance and cultural marginalisation. As I have shown in the previous chapter, this can also be considered as true in the case of the Church of England and its appropriation of youth pilgrimages to Taizé. The reason for this interest on the part of traditional Church institutions is the extraordinary flexibility and richness of this practice. As exemplified by the case of Taizé, pilgrimages are able to intercept a variety of individual motivations and are primarily appropriated as an embodied, exteriorised expression of an inner spiritual journey (Reader 2007: 215). While in the past these journeys were generally motivated by the hope of being miraculously healed from a bodily illness, today they are often spurred by a sense of spiritual or existential malaise (Harris 2010, 2013). As we will see below, this motivation is frequently associated with anti-modern themes such as a desire to escape from an ordinary reality perceived as oppressive and alienating, where individuals are continuously at risk of losing contact with their true self. Going on a pilgrimage becomes a way to break the pressure of everyday constraints and embark on an embodied journey whose destination is a personal recovery of meaning. This subject-centred focus implies an emphasis on the autonomous character of religious experience and, as such, stands in tension with religious authorities' attempts at imposing an official theological script as

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<sup>108</sup> During his papacy, Pope John Paul II consistently promoted ancient and more recent pilgrimage centres, with the purpose of revitalising the Catholic Church and, in some cases, encouraging anti-Communist political resistance. Thus, in his first foreign travel, he visited the pilgrimage centre of Guadalupe, in Mexico (1979), an act he repeated in 1990, 1999, and 2002; he repeatedly visited Santiago de Compostela and integrated this route among the ones which it would have been meritorious to walk during the 1999 Holy Year. Furthermore, he promoted the normalisation of sanctuaries supported by popular piety, such as San Giovanni Rotondo, and encouraged the devotion to shrines, such as Lourdes, Fatima, and Medjugorje. As part of his strategy of evangelisation, he also created a new form of pilgrimage specifically targeting the new generations, the World Youth Days (Reader 2007; Rymarz 2008). A Protestant example of using this practice as a way to revitalise a traditional Church is provided by the Norwegian Lutheran Church's creation of a new pilgrimage route modelled on the Camino of Santiago de Compostela and dedicated to St Olav (Mikaelsson 2012).

the basis for interpreting these pilgrimage journeys. The case under study in this thesis does not represent an exception to these trends, as we will see.

In the present chapter, I will further discuss the findings emerging from my empirical fieldwork in light of the divergence between objective and subjective interpretations of Taizé's youth pilgrimages. As anticipated in the methodology chapter, this discussion will be introduced by a survey of pilgrimage studies literature that will situate this tension within the broader perspective of contemporary pilgrimage research (5.2). After this preliminary survey, I will focus on Taizé's actual mediation by reconstructing the theological text embedded in its performance (5.3). The analysis of my empirical findings on the Community's concrete articulation of its pilgrimages will concentrate on the possible shifts of emphasis and repositioning of meanings that practical expressions can implicitly generate. In light of the objective of this thesis, this section will further define the theological text concretely mediated by Taizé and, by contrast, potential divergences in young people's interpretations. These will be the focus of the last part of the chapter, which will concentrate on analysing participants' subjective appropriations of their pilgrimage experience (5.4). As I will show below, this section will confirm the initial hypothesis of my research by showing how, in many cases, participants' interpretations significantly departed from the Community's vision of ascetic commitment to ecumenical unity and were oriented by a spirituality of holistic questing for spiritual and existential meaning.

## **5.2 Pilgrimage studies literature**

The analysis of the interplay between an institution's objective mediation and participants' subjective appropriation is a central research theme in the area of pilgrimage studies. Over the decades, this discipline has gradually shifted from an initial dominant focus on the study of institutional structures to a contemporary emphasis on individual experience. This shift is of particular relevance for the objective of my thesis. In the last three decades, in fact, numerous studies have explored the interpretive variances underlying the practice of pilgrimage. This literature review will examine some of the most influential developments in the field and their relevance for this thesis. As I will show below, the theoretical tools elaborated by pilgrimage studies research can provide important contributions to a critical theological reflection on the practice under study. Surprisingly, while in the European context many scholars have focused on famous Catholic shrines such as Lourdes or Compostela, very little attention has been given

to the Taizé Community and its specifically youth oriented form of pilgrimage. As this survey of the literature will show, however, the findings emerging from my empirical analysis present numerous affinities with phenomena observed in other religious shrines.

In the last three decades, the anthropological study of pilgrimage has developed from a relatively marginal and underdeveloped area to an increasingly diversified disciplinary umbrella. In its early origins it was characterised by an objective emphasis on the study of religious structures. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, researchers concentrated their attention on societies seemingly untouched by the influence of Western culture. As a result, the first studies on Christian shrines mostly involved non-European pilgrimage centres, particularly in Central and South America or Asia (Eade and Sallnow 2000: ix-x). Two theoretical frameworks underlay research: a functionalist perspective inspired by Emile Durkheim's studies and a materialist view influenced by Karl Marx's thought, with a continuum of intermediate positions between these two. The first view implied an evolutionary perspective and emphasised a functional correspondence and substantial coherence between societal and religious structures. Religion supported the organisation of social life by defining groups and regulating its members' behaviours (Durkheim 1995: 76-77; Eade and Sallnow 2000: 3; Coleman and Elsner 1995: 199-200). As a consequence of this position, the focus of functionalist research was collective: social phenomena emerged from society and not from individuals, who were in fact largely controlled by them (Kunin 2003: 19). Pilgrimages reflected broader social dynamics and contributed to the construction of collective identity and unity (Raj and Morpeth 2007: 51; McCorriston 2011: 21). The Marxist perspective shared with the functionalist view a similar collective and structural focus. Cults were involved in generating and maintaining ideologies that perpetuated and legitimized power and oppression (Eade and Sallnow 2000: xxi, 4; Bax 1995). Research oriented by this perspective emphasised the influence of political and economic structures in the development of shrines and in religious conflicts; these entities often manipulated the role of sanctuaries or used them as a source of income (Duijzings 2000; Bax and Koster 1993).

A third way between these two theoretical frameworks emerged with the publication of Victor Turner's studies on pilgrimage (Turner 1969, 1974a, 1974b; Turner and Turner 1978). In contrast to the functionalist and materialist perspectives, Turner rejected the idea of religion as mere social function or instrument of power. Underlying his studies was Eliade's idea of shrines as expressions of an archetypal sacred centre marked off from the profane world and inherently

capable of opening a way to the transcendent (Eliade 1963; Eade and Sallnow 2000: 6; Sheldrake 2001: 5). Turner's pilgrimage theory drew from Van Gennep's ethnographic research on rites of passage, according to which these included three stages: an initial separation from existing social conditions; a transformative 'liminal stage' that took place in a deserted, neutral space at the margins of society and was sustained by a specific form of sociality defined as '*communitas*'; a reintegrative phase that involved the assumption of a new social identity (Gennep 1960). Turner applied this tripartite ritual structure to the study of pilgrimage. In his view, this involved a separation of the pilgrim from ordinary life, a liminal phase involving the actual pilgrimage, and a return to everyday life. According to Turner, in more recent societies pilgrimage has replaced the initiation rituals of tribal societies (Turner 1974a: 182). Against Van Gennep's emphasis on the social role of rites of passage and in opposition to the previous functionalist and materialist perspective, Turner highlighted the anti-structural, dialectical role of pilgrimage as a phenomenon characterized by liminality and *communitas* (Turner 1974a). According to Turner, experiencing *communitas* was the main motivation leading individuals to participate in a pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978). This was a state marked by a '*blend... of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship*' (Turner 1969: 96), a spontaneous form of homogeneous community characterized by a solidarity that temporarily transcended hierarchical, economic, and cultural divisions. In this context, individuals were freed from their social *personae* and could allow their essential core to emerge. This temporary suspension made pilgrimage an ideal ritual context for religions to realise a transcultural form of universalism (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 4; Turner 1974a: 202). In Turner's view, pilgrimages inherently represented a form of subversive, anti-structural critique which opened individuals' imagination to new possibilities (Turner 1974a: 202; Coleman and Elsner 1995: 201; Dubisch 1995: 42). In contemporary times, it was precisely this subversive aspect that made pilgrimage particularly successful as an expression of anti-institutional protest (Turner 1974a: 172).

In her study of Taizé's liturgical music as ritual symbol, Kubicki applied Turner's theoretical framework to the analysis of pilgrimage as objectively structured by the Community (Kubicki 1999). In her view, the characteristics of Taizé's utopian representation showed elements of close affinity to the phenomena analysed by Turner. The liminal void created by the suspension of ordinary societal divisions allowed the Community to replace ordinary structures by an alternative order that prophetically challenged present realities (Kubicki 1999: 136; Turner 1969: 135). In this perspective, Taizé provides an experience of anti-structural reversal: by

worshipping together, sharing meals, working and discussing in groups, and sleeping in common accommodations pilgrims experience cooperation and equality. The aim of this participative enactment is to achieve a provisional form of Christian reconciliation. The centre of this alternative '*structuring structure*' (Kubicki 1999: 134) is the inner circle of the Taizé brothers: clothed in white robes, sitting at the centre of the Church of Reconciliation—the geographic and symbolic axis of life at the Community—the brothers configure themselves as an anticipatory symbol of the horizon of unity to which this collective performance points (Kubicki 1999: 129-46). Kubicki's analysis, while it provides useful insights on the objective characteristics of Taizé's mediation, admittedly suffers from a lack of subjective evidence supporting its conclusions (Kubicki 1999: 129). Its exclusive institutional focus is a weakness it shares with Turner's theory, for which it has been the object of numerous critiques. As highlighted in the previous chapter, young people's ways of inhabiting the '*structuring structure*' created by the Community are more complex and contradictory than Kubicki's reconstruction would imply. For similar reasons, while Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas* may be usefully applied as heuristic categories to analyse the structure of Taizé's objective mediation, empirical verification and critical caution should always determine the limits within which his theory can be adopted as a guiding theoretical framework.

Therefore, while Turner's conceptual vocabulary continues to be influential in pilgrimage studies, his general theory has undergone significant criticism. Further ethnographic research has repeatedly falsified Turner's theory (Reader and Walter 1993: 10-15; Eade and Sallnow 2000: 4-5; Badone and Roseman 2004: 3-5; Dubisch 1995: 42-44; Margry 2008: 21-22; Coleman and Eade 2004: 4). British anthropologists Eade and Sallnow formulated one of the strongest and most influential critiques (Eade and Sallnow 2000). In their view, Turner's radical dichotomy structure-*communitas* did not have the capacity to explain the complex social, religious, economic, and political interplays connecting pilgrimage phenomena to their societal contexts. While these cults could not simply be reduced to mere representations of wider arrangements, as in the functionalist framework, contrary to Turner's view the dynamics at work in pilgrimage sites could not be seen as completely self-contained and needed to be considered within a broader perspective (Eade and Sallnow 2000: xii-xiii). Eade and Sallnow's intent was to deconstruct pilgrimage, which they described as '*an arena of competing discourses*' (Eade and Sallnow 2000: xiii), a fundamentally heterogeneous process whose complexity and plurality Turner's totalising framework tended to marginalise. In their view, the power of pilgrimage

consisted in its capacity to work as a '*religious void, a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices*' (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 15). Different categories of pilgrims brought to a shrine their own understandings of their pilgrimage's meaning, while at the same time resident religious specialists tried to represent and mediate a different and often diverging discourse. Therefore, pilgrimage could involve at the same time consensus and *communitas* but also misunderstandings and competing interpretations (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 15). Eade and Sallnow encouraged anthropologists to reject any essentialist approach focusing on universal characteristics and advocated studying each pilgrimage phenomenon in its historical, social, cultural, and religious specificity (Eade and Sallnow 2000: xiii, 4). The erosion of Turner's theoretical paradigm helped pilgrimage studies to exit what Coleman and Eade defined as '*a theoretical cul-de-sac*' (Coleman and Eade 2004: 4). The segregation of pilgrimage in the realm of the extraordinary had the effect of limiting the academic study of this subject and isolated it from other disciplinary areas (Coleman and Eade 2004: 3; Morinis 1992: 2). The deconstructive trend inaugurated by Eade and Sallnow's critique of Turner (Eade and Sallnow 2000) opened a phase of considerable development for pilgrimage studies. In recent decades, this has been marked by an increasing level of methodological diversity, involving the adoption of a rich variety of interdisciplinary perspectives (Eade and Sallnow 2000: xx; Collins-Kreiner 2010). Rather than being completely dismissed, today Turner's conceptual vocabulary is used in a more flexible and eclectic way. Theoretical constructs such as *communitas* or liminality may or may not apply to a given pilgrimage setting and are constantly redefined based on the dynamics emerging from the field (Margry 2008: 22-23; Badone and Roseman 2004: 4; Dubisch 1995: 97).

This movement challenging grand narratives in pilgrimage studies (Eade and Sallnow 2000: xx-xxii) has been read by Collins-Kreiner as a shift towards postmodernism, a '*tendency to challenge existing theories and reject the clear-cut divisions within the prevailing scholarship*' (Collins-Kreiner 2010: 442). Contemporary pilgrimage studies are dominated by two interconnected trends, both presenting elements of specific relevance for this thesis. The first concentrates on the study of the often blurred distinctions between pilgrimage and tourism; the second is characterised by a focus on the subject and by an increasing attention to individual experience (Collins-Kreiner 2010).

The emergence of the first trend is connected to the development of tourism studies, which have progressively highlighted areas of contact between leisure travelling and pilgrimage.

Tourism's historical roots in pilgrimage and the shifting relationships between the two are well documented in recent research (Swatos and Tomasi 2002; Vukonić 2002; Dallen and Olsen 2005). Early tourism studies have highlighted numerous convergences between these two forms of travelling: in his pioneering study *'The Tourist'*, Dean MacCannell (MacCannell 1976) was the first to give tourism a new dignity as an expression of a personal and often inarticulate search for meaning (MacCannell 1976: 159-60; Leivadi, Yiannakis, and Apostolopoulos 2002: 98). According to this perspective, tourists are driven by a quest for a subjective authenticity perceived as missing in an alienated world. This quest drives contemporary individuals towards the primitive, the genuine, and the natural in a search for self-renewal (Ivanovic 2008: 323; Eade and Sallnow 2000: xviii; MacCannell 1973). Graburn (Graburn 2001, 1977) considered tourism as a form of secular ritual parallel to religious pilgrimage: both forms of travel could be interpreted as sacred journeys aimed at self-transformation through contact with an extraordinary or sacred dimension. Graburn's perspective was influenced both by the functionalist framework and by Turner's studies on ritual. Individuals' lives are articulated around the polarity ordinary-extraordinary, work and holiday, routinely alternating in a cycle regulated by rituals of subjective recreation (Stausberg 2011: 23). In recent years, the development of tourism studies has led researchers to analyse pilgrimage from a plurality of disciplinary perspectives (Dallen and Olsen 2005). Numerous studies have focused on highlighting similarities and differences between pilgrims and tourists (Cohen 1992a, 1992b, 1998; Digance 2003, 2006; Frey 1998; MacCannell 1973; Dallen and Olsen 2005; Vukonić 1996; Smith 1992). Smith has elaborated the idea of a continuum pilgrimage-tourism including endless possible combinations along the two poles sacred-secular. This continuum represents the multiple and shifting motivations of contemporary travellers, whose focus and activities often more or less consciously move between the two ends (Smith 1992; Collins-Kreiner 2010: 443). Badone and Roseman argue that in a postmodern context it becomes more and more problematic to apply rigid dichotomies between pilgrimage and tourism, sacred and secular forms of travelling, as these distinctions tend to obscure rather than illuminate the continuum existing between these two poles (Badone and Roseman 2004: 2, 19). In Tomasi's words, *'there is no contradiction between piety and relaxation'* (Tomasi 2002: 19). A consequence of this blurring of boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism has been the emergence of a rich literature dedicated to the analysis of secular forms of pilgrimage, often connected to popular culture (Reader and Walter 1993; Aden 1999; Margry 2008; Alderman 2002; Reader 2014). A



significant difficulty in separating these areas of research is represented by the contemporary religious context, characterised by what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has described as a 'subjective' turn (Taylor 2007, 2002; Flanagan and Jupp 2007; Heelas 2005) and by a progressive deregulation of belief (Hervieu-Léger 1999; Davie 1994, 2000, 2002). These developments contribute to further intensify the ambiguous and contested nature of pilgrimage (Badone and Roseman 2004; Frey 1998; Swatos and Tomasi 2002; Harris 2013; Herrero 2008; Eade and Sallnow 2000). Sociological phenomena, such as the increasing tendency towards a subjectivisation and deregulation of religion, have imposed a broadening of perspective to embrace the analysis of an entirely new range of possible settings: war memorials, celebrity graves, secular shrines, and spiritual festivals (Reader 2014; Reader and Walter 1993; Margry 2008). In this framework, rigid separations between sacred and profane are abolished, as the very definition of sacred rests upon a subject's inner search for meaning. Similarly to what has been described in the previous chapter, this definition can be multiform even among pilgrims of the same shrine and become the focus of competing interpretations, opposing institutionally enforced theologies and pilgrims' own meanings. Furthermore, this subjectivisation of the sacred implies a broadening of the options available to the individual. Pilgrimages can involve a surprising variety of experiences as long as they bear individual significance (Swatos and Tomasi 2002: 20).

Two important voices in this conversation have been provided by British anthropologists Simon Coleman and John Eade, who have rightly pointed out the necessity to broaden the perspective from a dominant emphasis on place to a more holistic focus on pilgrimage as a process, thus including mobility as an embodied, transformative reflexive practice (Coleman and Eade 2004: 2-3, 17-19). Underlying this perspective is a framework that '*seeks to understand actors' own models of pilgrimage or sacralised travel*' without assuming that their travelling is '*by definition divorced from other aspects of social, cultural and indeed religious life*' (Coleman and Eade 2004). These connections emerged with particular evidence in interviewees' experiences, together with the significance of mobility as a form of embodied reflexivity.

The emphasis on reflexivity and more broadly on the importance of a subjective perspective represents the second major trend dominating the area of contemporary pilgrimage studies (Collins-Kreiner 2010: 446; Badone and Roseman 2004: 5-8; Tomasi 2002). Given the objective of my thesis, this development holds particular relevance for my research. According to Collins-Kreiner, until the 1980s most pilgrimage studies literature tended to focus on the sociological

characteristics of the groups engaging in a pilgrimage or on the study of the features and meanings associated with the site itself (Collins-Kreiner 2010: 446-47; Turner 1969; Turner and Turner 1978; Nolan and Nolan 1992, 1989; Vukonić 1996). In line with the developments described above, starting from the 1990s pilgrimage studies have progressively focused on individual subjects' perspectives. This has implied a move from the external study of a given phenomenon to the analysis of pilgrims' inner experiences. Consequently, the focus of research has shifted from pilgrimage as a general phenomenon to an individual, and therefore pluralistic, viewpoint (Collins-Kreiner 2010: 447). This development has involved three stages: the first, exemplified by the work of Cohen on visitors' typologies, was characterised by an attempt at classifying travellers' experiences in homogeneous subtypes (Cohen 1979); the second involved a deconstruction of these fixed categories to build more flexible and nuanced ways of understanding tourists' (or pilgrims') experiences (Collins-Kreiner and Klot 2000); the third is based on the understanding that a visitor's experience can be diverse and switch between different modes and intensities (Poria, Butler, and Airey 2003; Poria, Butler, and Airey 2004). Thus, while earlier pilgrimage studies emphasised an objective perspective according to which pilgrimage structures would determine a uniform experience, recent studies adopt a more nuanced perspective. Coleman has advocated a balance between the two approaches and critiqued Eade and Sallnow's idea that a shrine should be considered as a religious void or an empty vessel, as even a vessel has a specific shape with which visitors' subjective interpretations creatively engage (Coleman and Eade 2004; Coleman 2014). At the same time, from a subjective perspective an increasing number of studies have focused on the diversity of individual visitors' experiences (Badone and Roseman 2004; Frey 1998; Reader and Walter 1993). These have brought to light the fact that pilgrims interpret their experiences in different and even opposite ways; therefore, as emphasised by Collins-Kreiner, *'it is no longer sufficient to focus solely on the experience offered by the objective'* (Collins-Kreiner 2010: 448). The goal of current research consists in illuminating not only individual impressions but also the diversity of pilgrims' experiences, together with the needs they express (Collins-Kreiner 2010: 448). In relation to my research, this perspective has involved a particular attention to highlighting the diversity of young people's individual trajectories at Taizé.

In line with this focus on the subjective dimension of pilgrimage, Alana Harris' studies on adult and youth pilgrimages to Lourdes (Harris 2013, 2010), Helena Vilaça's comparative study of Fatima, Santiago, and Taizé (Vilaça 2010), and Richard Rymarz's research on the Catholic

World Youth Day (Rymarz 2008), among others, have represented particularly useful contributions for my study. Harris' study on British youth pilgrims visiting the Marian shrine of Lourdes constitutes an interesting and relatively rare example of pilgrimage research focusing on young people (Harris 2010). Her findings present a significant number of affinities with those highlighted by my fieldwork at Taizé, as it will emerge further in this chapter. In Harris' perspective, pilgrimage constitutes a space of existential reflexivity, a customisable vehicle of personal spiritual quests and deep explorations of the self (Harris 2010: 140). The pilgrimage process and the shrine itself work as a liminal space providing relief from the constraints of ordinary life and implicitly mediate a critique of contemporary lifestyle. In Harris' study of Lourdes, youth creatively appropriated their pilgrimage as a cyclical opportunity to re-centre their lives, find spiritual healing, recover from times of personal crisis, and only rarely to find relief from physical illnesses. This interpretation marked a significant departure from the shrine's thaumaturgic tradition (Harris 2010: 143). For Harris, this dominant emphasis on personal self-construction and inner healing points out a spirituality whose horizon is holistic and life-oriented, generally not interested in Marian devotion and doctrinal concerns but in prioritising embodied spiritual expressions, particularly in worship (Harris 2010: 140-43). These characteristics lead her to argue, against Heelas and Woodhead (Heelas 2005) and with Taylor, Flory, and Miller (Taylor 2002: 112; Flory and Miller 2008: 157), that these forms of experiential, subject-oriented spiritual exploration do not necessarily imply a breaking of commitments with traditional religious options but rather their customisation (Harris 2010: 139, 42). The findings emerging from my fieldwork support Harris' point. As I will further argue below, for young people, participating in a pilgrimage represented a resource by which they could intensify their holistic explorations; furthermore, this option was generally appropriated as an integration and not as an alternative to ordinary religious commitments. A further important element emerging from Harris' analysis of young people's experiences at Lourdes was that this self-expressive, experiential, and embodied spirituality was not individualistic but rather found supplementation and support in the access to a relational and collective dimension. In this case, too, as I will show, my research findings concur with Harris' conclusions. At Lourdes, communal worship provided an emotional sense of unity with the other, both present and past; the powerful aesthetic environment in which liturgies took place was perceived as supporting prayer and self-exploration (Harris 2010: 144). Beyond these aspects, young pilgrims appreciated the feeling of safety and relational intimacy provided by personal exchanges with other pilgrims, outside of

formally prescribed activities. As at Taizé, this sense of reciprocal acceptance constituted one of the most important elements in pilgrims' experience and showed how, for young people, sacred and profane, formal and informal holistically converged to foster their spiritual and personal searching (Harris 2010: 147). In light of her findings, Harris connects the popularity of contemporary pilgrimage sites to the fact that they constitute a flexible canopy for a spirituality that '*engages emotions and impulses involving not just heads and hearts but also bodies*', as today's spiritual quests try to give expression to a holistic '*search of unity of mind, body and the self*' (Roof 1999: 46; Harris 2010: 147). The findings of Harris' research on British young pilgrims at Lourdes are connected to a more comprehensive cross-generational project (Harris 2013) investigating the shifts in the interpretation of the thaumaturgic dimension of this shrine. Rather than being motivated by a desire of physical recovery, according to Harris contemporary Lourdes pilgrims search for forms of healing intended as '*exploration of embodied, communal and holistic aspirations*' (Harris 2013: 23) and emphasising self-realisation, connectedness, and personal well-being. Like Taizé, in this sense, Lourdes can be seen as an arena of negotiations between the shrine's official theology and pilgrims' interpretations. Ritual is an embodied vehicle to access individuals' inner lives and emotions, a space of self-validation and spiritual experiencing (Harris 2013: 24-25). Furthermore, at an intersubjective level, the shrine provides spaces for empathetic conversations between pilgrims. This is a way for them to progressively master verbal and embodied languages, express feelings and painful experiences, and enter a space of '*existential mobility*' (Harris 2013: 36; Egan 2010). Pilgrimage thus becomes a form of performative faith, a means of personal exploration and expression (Harris 2013: 30-31). Harris' studies illuminate the interplay between divergent views of salvation—a transcendent and objective one, mediated by the institution, and a life-oriented and holistic perspective, emerging from pilgrims' subjective interpretations. These dynamics of negotiation and adaptation are well documented in pilgrimage studies literature (Eade and Sallnow 2000; Frey 1998; Coleman and Eade 2004).

In her research on pilgrimages as a contemporary expression of a privatised religious ritual, Portuguese sociologist Helena Vilaça (Vilaça 2010) has provided a helpful analysis of the Community's mediation. In her view, Taizé's youth pilgrimages can be seen as a temporary, participative enactment of a parable—an expression frequently found in Brother Roger's writings (Schutz 1954; Schutz and Taizé 1965)—of a perfect world where denominational, social, cultural, and interpersonal barriers are overcome (Vilaça 2010: 150-51). Young people

are incorporated in the Community's utopian undertaking as partners and actors in the enactment of a prophetic, although ephemeral, representation of unity. Villaça's analysis, which builds upon previous studies conducted by French sociologist Hervieu-Léger (Hervieu-Léger 1999), suggests that Taizé's mediation could be explained as the embodiment of '*a double utopia: the return to the imagined purity of the primitive church and, through its interactive pluralism, the projection of a future, reconciled Christianity*' (Villaça 2010: 151). A further, valuable contribution to this thesis has been provided by Richard Rymarz's research on the Catholic World Youth Day (Rymarz 2008). These meetings, which found their original blueprint in the international gatherings of the Taizé Community (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 98-118), represent an example of intentional appropriation of the practice of pilgrimage by a Church aiming at revitalising its ministry with young people. In Rymarz's view the Catholic World Youth Day is particularly effective in providing a form of social validation and affective affirmation of youth's denominational identity. By meeting thousands of other young people and interacting with the symbols and the languages of the Catholic tradition, young people find a confirmation of the plausibility of their religious beliefs. This opens a space for a renewed exploration of the transcendent and for a re-appropriation of the Catholic faith (Rymarz 2008). As seen in the previous chapter, at Taizé the experience of being involved in communal prayers with thousands of young people similarly validated and provided plausibility to interviewees' individual trajectories; as I will argue below, however, the specific characteristics of Taizé's mediation implied that this sense of validation and plausibility was differently invested. The World Youth Day and Taizé's weekly retreats both represent attempts by contemporary churches to appropriate the practice of pilgrimage as a pastoral instrument to revive young people's interest in religion (Margry 2008: 26). As demonstrated by Harris' studies, however, young people's appropriation of these experiences is always the product of complex negotiations. Exploring these dynamics will be the object of the remaining part of this chapter.

### **5.3 Youth pilgrimages to Taizé: an objective perspective**

In the previous section, I highlighted how contemporary approaches to the study of pilgrimage have shifted their focus from an institution oriented perspective to an emphasis on the fluctuating and diverse character of pilgrims' subjective experience (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 15). However, this focus should not imply going from the extreme of considering pilgrims'

experiences as uniformly fashioned by an external structure to that of discouraging any analysis of pilgrimage's objective aspects, as if they had virtually no bearing on these phenomena (Coleman and Elsner 1995: 209). While pilgrimage studies have widely incorporated the contemporary emphasis on the subjective character of pilgrims' interpretations, this understanding should not marginalise the importance of investigating the complex interplay between a pilgrimage's institutional narrative, its practical expressions, and pilgrims' appropriations (Coleman and Elsner 1995: 209; Coleman and Eade 2004; Coleman 2014). Rather than being a religious void (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 15), an amorphous vehicle of young people's aspirations, pilgrimage practice articulates a specific theological text into a concrete vessel that contains and, to varying extents, shapes a pilgrim's experience (Coleman and Elsner 1995: 209-13). Consistent with the purpose of this thesis, the objective of this section is to use pilgrimage studies as a framework to analyse the complex intersection of the text objectively mediated by the Community with young people's subjective interpretations.

With this in mind, it is important to point out that the theological narrative emerging from an institution's practical mediation often presents substantial differences of emphasis from its intended theology. As highlighted by Ward, theology's practical articulation often repositions meanings, which can shift as different signifiers '*interact and inform each other*' (Ward 2008: 127). Therefore, my analysis will give specific attention to some key aspects of the interplay between the Community's foundational theology and its actual mediation. This will contribute to further define the theological script concretely represented in Taizé's pilgrimages and its possible interactions with young people's interpretations.

This task is particularly important in that, as we have seen in the first part of this thesis (Chapters One and Three), Brother Roger never conceived his vocation as that of a theologian. Rather than theology, the founder of Taizé firmly trusted the prophetic language of embodied signs, which in his view could deeply influence and transform reality. In this sense, Brother Roger's most important theological text was practice. Since the beginning, the Taizé Community was conceived as an embodied symbol, a parable of reconciliation enacted by a core group of virtuoso believers, the Brothers. The idea of a living prophetic embodiment represents the chosen mode of the Community's reformative action; young people's involvement in this performance is intended to enact a symbolic pedagogy of spiritual unity.

As pointed out during my analysis of Brother Roger's theology (Chapter Three), a restorationist foundation underlay his vision of a future reconciled Church, of which the Community

represented an anticipatory and transformative sign. The biblical narrative enacted in Taizé's parable of reconciliation was the portrait of the apostolic Church contained in Acts 4.32 (Roger 1969: 18, 20-21, 25; Schutz 1970b: 8, 11-19, 29-31, 66-70, 76-78, 88-89, 121-23, 33-40). In Brother Roger's thought, this description constituted the practical incarnation of the model of brotherly love and unity Christ prescribed in his last prayer (John 17.21) as normative for all his true disciples (Schutz 1943: 158). In her study of Taizé's pilgrimages, Vilaça supports this interpretation and synthesises the text embedded in the Community's embodied parable as

*A double utopia: the return to the imagined purity of the primitive church and, through its interactive pluralism, the projection of a future, reconciled Christianity.* (Vilaça 2010: 151)

In terms of its objective mediation, Taizé articulates this theological narrative by drawing from the tradition of Christian pilgrimage. The adoption of this structure has important theological implications. The practice of pilgrimage takes its roots in

*An ascetic Christian culture [...] honing human lives into purified mediums of significance, (which) drew heavily upon the expressive possibilities of geographical movement to make eloquent nonverbal arguments about human nature, time, and the world. The styles of travel it developed may be regarded as forms of folk anthropology and folk theology; ways of testing, symbolically representing, and confirming beliefs.* (Adler 2002: 27-28)

Pilgrimage is, therefore, a form of embodied theology that adopts spatial and symbolic devices—forms of representation—to convey meanings related to the relationship between God, the individual, and the world. As we have seen, the narrative encoded in the Community's performance revolves around the theme of a return to the imagined purity and brotherly communion of the apostolic Church but is intended, at the same time, as a prophetic enactment of a future, reconciled Christianity (Vilaça 2010). The original biblical context of this narrative (Acts 4.32) does not involve a separation from the world; on the contrary, it presupposes an intense interaction between the apostolic community and the very centre of Jewish political, cultural, and religious identity—Jerusalem. In Taizé's representation, however, the practice of pilgrimage articulates the biblical text with a topos of flight from the world or, in Adler's terms, of 'ascetic primitivism' (Adler 2002: 34). Its roots are grounded in a long Christian tradition whose origins are in the Old Testament narratives of Israel wandering in the desert—a place of purity and divine epiphanies opposed to the spiritual and moral confusion of the cities of Egypt. Framing the symbolic enactment of the Acts narrative within the context of a pilgrimage, as in Taizé's practice, gives a specific emphasis of meaning to the Community's representation, with the idea of a dualism opposing the ascetic spirituality of the wilderness and secular urban life. In

this context, simplicity and nomadism, with their underlying emphasis on the provisional dimension of our living in the world, represent and authenticate holiness.<sup>109</sup> This symbolic representation of wilderness can also be read in the extreme vigilance Taizé applies (not unlike other major pilgrimage sites) to preserving a low level of urbanisation around the Community. This distance is not only physical but also theological and, if reduced, would undermine its otherworldly legitimacy (Adler 2002: 35-38). Encountering God requires a temporary exile and withdrawal from the world, which involves leaving home and its security to become a stranger in (literally, in the case of Taizé) an alien land, surrounded by other strangers. In this representation, spirituality involves ascetic commitment, renunciation, humiliation, and reliance on God, who is made the structuring centre of life. Metaphorically, pilgrimage is thus articulated as a form of radical detachment and disengagement from the ordinary and, beyond this, from a world conceived as distracting and incompatible with total dedication to God<sup>110</sup> (Adler 2002: 33). This dualistic theme can also be seen at work in the Community's choice to put young people at the centre of its representation and marginalise the presence of adults, which represents a further shift from the narrative of Acts 4.32. As we have seen in Chapter Three, this aspect of Taizé's practice has deep roots in Brother Roger's thought. Here the theme of youth is closely associated to ideas such as innocence, spiritual revival, and a peaceful, reconciled humankind; on the contrary, the adult generation is often seen as an obstacle for its disenchantment and its attachment to the unchangeable dynamics of the past. Distancing from the world of the adults to create an ideal youth community, with the Brothers at the centre, concretely articulates the Community's utopia of universal brotherhood with Brother Roger's idealisation of young people. In this context, the symbolic and physical marginalisation of adults can be read as a further expression of the Community's topos of flight from the world and its complexity into a staged, simplified haven of imaginary innocence. This theme of dualistic withdrawal is further accentuated by a pronounced 'sanitisation' of youth, who are only considered in the idealised terms suggested by Brother Roger's theology, as the ascetic agents of a spiritual vision of

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<sup>109</sup> According to Adler, this ascetic, heroic element also helps to explain why this kind of spirituality was predominantly male oriented, as it played with a gendered contrast between '*virile, forbidding, yet pure wilderness life and the soft, wet, sinful (female) life of the towns and cultivated lands*' (Adler 2002: 34), in which man is imagined as a new Adam, having reconquered his innocence and independence, in a new Eden prior to the creation of Eve and, therefore, to sin and sexual interdependence. Taizé's representation is, not incidentally, one that marginalises women to the role of invisible helpers or spectators, excluded from the core community—the Brothers—that, especially during prayer services, re-enact the narrative of a pure, reconciled Church.

<sup>110</sup> As noted by Tomasi, through withdrawal, simplification, and levelling pilgrims engage '*in bodily and temporal modes that subvert or transcend the rushing, mechanised world of modernity and postmodernity*' (Coleman and Eade 2004: 11). Taizé's theological narrative of return to the evangelical purity of the Church is thus articulated as an implicit anti-structural and anti-modern message.



renewal and ecumenical communion and not in their complex and sometimes unsettling earthly reality. At a practical level, this is evidenced by the Community's lack of interest in themes connected to young people's concrete living in the world (sexuality, self-image, depression, youth culture, only to make some examples), which are conspicuously absent from its mediation.

As I showed in the previous chapter, to represent its utopia the Community makes use of strategies of levelling and masking of difference. Beyond generational homogeneity, these involve a temporary concealing of hierarchical structures, in a representation of ascetic lowliness that shapes the most basic elements of life at the Community, from meals to accommodations to young people's involvement in humble chores, such as washing dishes or cleaning toilets. Its aim is not only to emphasise simplicity and dependence on God but also to create a sense of community by pointing out the '*essential and generic human bond*' (Turner 1969: 99, 142-43) that connects, against worldly hierarchies, all participants in Taizé's ecumenical enactment. A further device utilised to stage Taizé's ideal community is synchronicity, which involves the structuring of young people's life in one shared space, inhabited according to the same time schedule and oriented towards the same spiritual centre. This way of representing unity is not uncommon in pilgrimages. In his study of interdenominational pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Bowman observes how unity can be enacted in the form of a temporary synchronicity, which masks '*differences beneath identical repertoires of movements and utterances*' (Bowman 2000: 98). This creates an image of unity *in situ*, as young people animate the Community's expressions: following the same daily routine and performing the same rites creates the appearance of a homogeneously focused community anti-structurally opposed to the centre-less chaos of everyday life.

As noted by Kubicki, Taizé's mediation presents elements of affinity with Turner's theoretical characterisation of pilgrimage. Young people's temporary withdrawal from ordinary life aims at creating a liminal space '*betwixt and between*' (Turner 1969: 97) where secular structures can be replaced by an alternative order inspired by a religious utopia. The purpose of this representation is both prophetic and transformative, as young people are not only made part of the utopian order constituted at Taizé but are also invited to become its agents in the world. In the Community's representation, in fact,

*The anti-structure suspends the social structures [...] In their place are set up new symbolic structures. These serve as alternate cultural structures which, Turner*

*explains, protect and enclose the liminal experience and generate new structures of thought and feeling.* (Kubicki 1999: 136)

As highlighted in the literature review, however, a major weakness of Turner's theoretical framework is its dominant objective focus, which causes him to consider pilgrimage as a homogeneously determined experience. A direct consequence of this approach is a tendency to overlook the variety of subjective interpretations underlying pilgrims' participation (Morinis 1992; Eade and Sallnow 2000). This objection found further confirmation in my empirical findings. Inspired by the political movements of the 1960s (Turner 1969: ix) Turner considered pilgrimage as an anti-structural expression whose essential characteristic was to force social structures out of their rigidity and liberate creative change (Turner 1969; Grimes 1995: 149; Kubicki 1999: 130-31). Kubicki applies this framework to the analysis of the Community's prophetic enactment, which mediates its objective theology: by replacing everyday structures, hierarchies, and norms by an alternative order, the Community aims at promoting its broad vision of spiritual revitalisation and ecumenical reconciliation (Kubicki 1999: 129-46). As we have seen, however, it is precisely this anti-structural element that appears to be largely marginal, if not entirely absent, in participants' interpretations. Rather than embracing Taizé's ecumenical utopia, pilgrims predominantly utilised the generative space opened by the temporary suspension of their ordinary life as a vehicle of existential mobility to find personal purpose and healing (Egan 2010; Harris 2013). The anti-structure mediated by Taizé was thus appropriated as a vessel to pursue holistic trajectories of meaning making and self-construction. In this sense, against Turner, I would argue that rather than being a place *'betwixt and between'* (Turner 1969: 97), an empty interstice, at Taizé liminality was inhabited as an *'intrastice'* (Korol-Evans 2009: 8) young people filled by being intensely present to their ongoing quests and yet temporarily relieved from the busyness of everyday life. In this perspective, the meaning of the original Turnerian category of *communitas* was also profoundly modified: the spontaneity of relationships brought about by the practices of egalitarian lowliness, solidarity, and cooperation enacted by the Community was not put to the service of a utopian vision, but individually and selectively invested to provide intersubjective resources supporting individuals' search for meaning and direction.

This fundamental divergence should not come as a surprise. In my reconstruction of Brother Roger's theology (Chapter Three), I recalled how the Prior of Taizé was himself acutely aware of young people's subject-centred focus and of their lack of interest for the vision of ascetic

commitment to ecumenical reconciliation promoted by the Community (Schutz 1983b: 47). The findings emerging from my empirical fieldwork go in the direction highlighted by Brother Roger's concerns but, at the same time, point to what can be considered as the most successful aspect of the Community's theological mediation. If the objective destination Brother Roger intended for pilgrims' journey—their active involvement in Taizé's ecumenical mission— seems, in fact, to be of marginal interest for them, this does not imply that the spiritual vehicle made available by the Community cannot be appropriated to navigate through different, more personal explorations.

As I have shown above, the axis of Brother Roger's spirituality was an optimistic anthropology, according to which human beings carry within themselves an implicit desire for unity with God. Upon this foundation, the Prior of Taizé built a non-directive form of contemplative spirituality that emphasised the centrality of direct revelation and the epistemological role of subjective perception and experience. In terms of practice, this translated into a form of mediation aimed at creating the spiritual conditions for individuals' intimate desire for unity with God to emerge from the depths of their inner soul. This explains the ample space given by the Community to expressions such as silence, meditative singing, prayer, and peer-led exchanges. The reflexive structure thus shaped was intended to invite pilgrims to recover contact with their inner self and become aware of the reality of Christ's desire of communion with all human beings. This awareness would have led them to interiorise the only real destination of this pilgrimage, which was not self-exploration or a merely external participation in an ecumenical enactment, but the inner embracing of a broad prophetic vision as active agents of unity with God and among human beings in the world.

This understanding of pilgrimage merges pre-Reformation and post-Reformation views of this practice. According to Kaelber, Luther contested the long tradition of pilgrimages to Rome and Compostela and pointed out that, rather than being to external centres of devotion, the true Christian pilgrimage needed to be only '*to the prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospels*' (Kaelber 2002: 64) and had to take place in each believer's inner soul. Taizé's mediation, with its performative enactment of the ideal unity of the early Jerusalemite community, incorporates the pre-Reformation model of pilgrimage as physical convergence towards an external centre of devotion but articulates it with an emphasis on the centrality of the subject as individual recipient of God's revelation. Going to Taizé implies a movement through space towards a physical centre and an objective performance; however, the actual pilgrimage requires a subjective journey from self-centredness and inner divisions to unity with Christ and ascetic commitment,

as partners in the Community's 'joint undertaking'. In Luther's perspective, this interiorisation of the practice of pilgrimage found an external counterpoint in the centrality of the Scriptures as source of objective revelation and normative authority (Kaelber 2002). At Taizé, on the contrary, despite the Community's attempts at preserving some objective emphasis—in its liturgical Scripture reading and Bible introductions—the epistemological centrality of the role of the subject in direct dialogue with God leads to a marginalisation of these objective aspects of the Christian faith. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has explored this evolutionary arc in his work *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007). According to Taylor, the process of interiorisation of the sacred initiated by the Reformation, in all its branches, implies a collapsing of the spheres of the sacred and the profane into each other, with Christian life becoming a certain manner of living in the world. This emphasis on righteous living opens the way to what he defines as an anthropocentric shift. This involves a progressive rejection of the ascetic demands of external principles and norms and a subjective focus on how to live a fulfilled, prosperous life (Taylor 2007: 265-66). This process can be seen at work in young people's rejection of the Community's ascetic vision of commitment to ecumenical unity and in their attempts at building a more integrated, centred self. As I showed in the previous chapter, embodied expressions such as distancing, contemplation, collective rituals, and intersubjective exchanges were appropriated by participants as vehicles for them to reflect and consciously select elements of their self-identity (Giddens 1991). In a context in which contemporary individuals are compelled to construct their personal narratives or, in Hervieu-Leger's terms, their subjective eschatologies, Taizé constitutes an extraordinarily adaptive vehicle of reflexivity, a vast warehouse of religious resources from which individuals can freely draw to compose their individual narratives of meaning (Beckford 1989; Hervieu-Léger 1999; Reader 2007; Harris 2010, 2013; Egan 2010).

In conclusion, this section adopted pilgrimage studies as a lens to further define the text mediated by the Community's concrete articulation of its practices. The purpose of this analysis was to illuminate the interplay between Taizé's objective mediation and young people's subjective appropriation. Within this framework, the discussion emphasised that, while there is no deterministic, uniform way for an institution to produce a homogeneous interpretation of its performance, the environment designed by the Community to facilitate its pilgrims' journey towards communion presents characteristics that make it a particularly hospitable canopy for participants' subject-focused explorations. As evidenced by my empirical findings, pilgrims

showed a predominant lack of interest for the vision of ascetic commitment to ecumenical unity mediated by the Community's enactment; rather, they appropriated the spiritual vehicle designed to help pilgrims interiorise Taizé's utopia as a means to intensify their pace on an ongoing pilgrimage towards individual fullness. This revealed a paradox in the Community's mediation; while Taizé makes use of strategies of distancing, levelling, and restructuring to stage an implicitly dualistic, anti-structural utopia, pilgrims use the generative space cleared by their distancing from ordinary life to engage in a personal journey that bridges transcendent and immanent concerns and holistically aims at recovering an existential and spiritual sense of centredness and purpose. Elements such as mobility and life restructuring, combined with the non-directive, highly accepting ethos characteristic of Taizé and its subjectively oriented, introspective spirituality, constitute a reflexive structure in which young people can pursue their personal explorations. It is to the analysis of these journeys that I will now turn by focusing on the findings emerging from young people's interpretations of their experience at the Community.

#### **5.4 Pilgrims' journeys: a subjective viewpoint**

When confronted with an analysis of the meanings participants attributed to their pilgrimage to Taizé, a primary finding emerged with substantial clarity. This highlighted the individual diversity of pilgrims' interpretations, which appeared to be closely correlated with their personal biographies. Helen's experience at the Community was a journey of spiritual and emotional recovery from her struggle following her father's decision to become a minister; Jack's pilgrimage embodied his itinerary out from the pain of a friend's recent death and the spiritual questioning it had caused; Amber appropriated her retreat as an opportunity to find support in her battle against low self-esteem; for Roberta, whose spirituality incorporated insights from different religious traditions, her Taizé experience was a confirmation of her belief in an all-embracing God, and validated her rejection of the narrow-minded ways of institutional Christianity; Sarah, a Fine Arts student and aspiring sculptress, utilised the Community's aesthetic environment and intersubjective resources as a vehicle to pursue her spiritual and existential quests, quite apart from the meanings officially mediated by Taizé. The highly individual character of these journeys and their intimate intertwining of transcendent and immanent aspirations constitute, in my view, significant arguments in support of my initial thesis,

according to which youth pilgrimages to Taizé are a crossroad of different interpretations holistically related to pilgrims' ongoing journeys of meaning.

To substantiate this claim, in the literature review I showed how a substantial body of pilgrimage research confirms the centrality of the subject's role in determining the meaning of a pilgrimage (Badone and Roseman 2004; Frey 1998; Reader 2007; Reader and Walter 1993; Collins-Kreiner 2010; Harris 2010, 2013; Eade and Sallnow 2000). Multiple studies have demonstrated the weaknesses of those theoretical paradigms that postulate pilgrimage's ability to deterministically mediate a uniform experience. Eade and Sallnow have been among the first to emphasise that pilgrimage should be considered as a '*realm of competing discourses*' (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 5). Rather than shaping homogeneous experiences and attitudes, pilgrimages embody a variety of highly individualised quests for identity, meaning, support, healing, or salvation (Eade and Sallnow 2000: xvii, 5; Reader and Walter 1993; Frey 1998; Badone and Roseman 2004: 91; Dubisch 1995: 42-44; Morinis 1992: 8; Margry 2008: 33-34). Contrary to what was argued by Reader, this individual questing does not necessarily imply a break of all commitments to traditional religiosity (Flory and Miller 2008: 157; Harris 2010, 2013; Reader 2007; Heelas 2005; Bruce 2002, 2011). Participants' diverse journeys and their intertwining of spiritual and pragmatic aspirations can rather be interpreted within the framework of what American sociologist Meredith McGuire has defined as '*lived religion*' (McGuire 2008). This is not an opposite of religion but a different perspective on the same phenomenon, which focuses on the concrete reality of individuals' religious lives. Lived religion indicates the fluid, ever-changing, eclectic, and often contradictory amalgam of ideas and practices by which we build '*the stories out of which we live*' (McGuire 2008: 98). As exemplified by the case of participants' appropriation of Taizé's mediation, its relationship with institutional religion is circular and dialogical, as it provides individuals with codes and structures they creatively use to build their constructions of meaning (McGuire 2008; Barker and Beckford 2008: 215-32). In its addressing human beings' concrete lives and material concerns, lived religion is intrinsically incarnational and holistic, and can be defined as an open-ended process of '*making the invisible visible*', tangible for the senses, present and active in all circumstances of everyday life (Orsi 2005: 73-74). This process could also be seen at work in participants' experience at Taizé. By spending time in contemplation and silent dialogue with God, Helen tried to make him present through her painful wrestling with her father's ministry choice. In a similar way, practices such as prayer and meditation embodied a space of encounter where Jack could question God about

his loss, and restore a sense of coherence and plausibility for his faith; in communal singing, personal prayer, and intersubjective exchanges Amber could find a way to make God's presence visible and perceptible in the midst of her struggles with self-image and emotional insecurities; physically moving out from the ordinary allowed Debbie, Amber, and Roberta to recover contact with an inner centre and restore the frayed threads of their lives into a meaningful pattern. All these explorations underlay a holistic interpretation of the meaning of Taizé's pilgrimages. In interviewees' questing, religion was intimately connected to an ongoing reflexive work of individual meaning making and self-construction, quite apart from the utopian enactment of ecumenical reconciliation mediated by the Community.

In this continuous, individual reflexive process the experience of pilgrimage constituted a transition of extraordinary intensity. This particular quality of pilgrimage was consistently attributed to mobility and distancing, which—in participants' views—took on a metaphorical, spiritual, and existential significance. Moving away from their ordinary contexts translated into physical expression a desire to recover contact with the sacred and with a more authentic dimension of their self. This core theme was recurrently associated with the idea of an ordinary life perceived as oppressive and alienating, from which they felt the need to take a temporary break. Physical distancing allowed participants to '*meditate away from the cares and distractions of their everyday lives*' (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 107), a point, they emphasised, was of central importance among their reasons for joining a pilgrimage. Mobility implied progressing towards a destination that was not external to the pilgrim but situated within her. The contemporary growth of pilgrimage has been connected to its ability to give tangible reality to inner spiritual and existential journeys (Reader 2007; Collins-Kreiner 2010; Margry 2008; Harris 2010, 2013). This understanding can be interpreted as the ultimate development of a long process. As pointed out by Tomasi (Tomasi 2002: 13-21), in post-medieval times the nature of pilgrimage gradually shifted: from an initial emphasis on institutionally regulated practices performed in authorised shrines for expiatory purposes, its focus progressively moved to stress individual transformation (Margry 2008: 26). In a contemporary context, this development leads to an appropriation of pilgrimage as a voluntary form of exploration whose destination is autonomously selected (Frey 1998; Egan 2010; Reader and Walter 1993; Reader 2014). In this framework, the journey aims at fulfilling the individual by expressing personal freedom and '*escape from necessity and purposiveness*' (Tomasi 2002: 13). Kaelber uses the concept of '*expressive subjectivity*' in association with forms of mobility aimed at '*expressive*

*and communicative*—rather than merely instrumental—purposes (Kaelber 2002: 26). These forms of travel allow individuals to explore alternative ways of being; they do not obey prescribed duties but a desire to build the self. In my view, the divergence between the ascetic theology embedded in Taizé's mediation and young people's interpretations can be connected to this shift. In the Western Christian tradition, the aim of a temporary withdrawal from the world was to come back spiritually rejuvenated and face the labours of the secular world. In a similar way, for Brother Roger the ultimate purpose of his Community's retreats was ascetic and missionary: the transformative spiritual experience of being part of Taizé's utopian enactment had to translate into an active testimony within the world. Pilgrimage aimed at strengthening individuals' commitment to transform society (Roger 1986: 7, 12-13; 2003: 22, 48, 69, 73; Roger and Communauté de Taizé. 2007: 128). Contrary to this ascetic orientation, interviews evidenced how, in a contemporary, subject-centred perspective, the idea of rejuvenation was connected, instead, to the purpose of reaching greater spiritual awareness and a renewed sense of self, to become a more integrated and balanced human being. Along this journey, the embodied spirituality of pilgrimage was a crucial resource (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 105-06, 12; Beckford 1989). In fact, it involved physically and metaphorically converging towards a centre of meaning, a movement that not only brought pilgrims to Taizé and away from their ordinary lives but was also rehearsed three times a day in their converging towards the centre of the Community, the Church of Reconciliation. Practices and rituals such as physical mobility, kneeling, sitting in silence, singing and meditating, and discursive self-exploration in prayer or with others are not only ways to give tangible expression and reality to pilgrims' inner questing; as argued by Catherine Bell, they are devices individuals use to accomplish a personal transformation through reflexive, emotional, and bodily experiences (Bell 1992, 1997; McGuire 2008: 171-72). In this sense, it is not a coincidence that in their interviews participants emphasised, above all, the exceptional salience of pilgrimage as a reflexive structure, with the various practices it made available, and only rarely focused on theological concepts (Margry 2008: 26; Harris 2010). Mobility and spiritual practices were considered as most effective ways for pilgrims to both represent and perform an individual journey of transformation that was, since the beginning, the real objective of their participation. The dominant salience of practice was further confirmed by participants' attempts at importing and adapting elements of Taizé's warehouse of codes, symbols, and rituals to make them part of their ordinary life, once back home. Erecting a reflexive liminal canopy by listening to Taizé music on their headphones,



creating a private altar of memorabilia bought at the Community (or elsewhere), immersing themselves in a special 'atmosphere' of candles and music, or taking part in a Taizé-style liturgy with friends were all devices participants adopted to bring the sacred into the ordinary and give reality to their ongoing, fluid, and often messy searches for God's presence in the midst of everyday reality.

These eclectic and autonomous forms of appropriation highlight a further aspect of the dynamics underlying the diversity of interpretations intersecting at Taizé. As illustrated in the previous chapter, interviewees' participation was characterised by their selectively appropriating, adapting, or discarding single elements of Taizé's mediation, depending on their salience for their individual journey. Thus, pilgrims could be virtually indifferent to the catechesis of the Bible introductions and subvert the use of structures, such as the Community's small groups or even the Prior's yearly letter. The singing could emotionally move some of them during communal services, while others would consider Taizé's liturgy as repetitive and use it as a meditative canopy to do their own journaling. Some entirely skipped communal prayers and prioritised intersubjective exchanges, instead; others ex-corporated specific ideas to re-articulate them as part of their personal theologies or selected certain symbols and practices to make them part of their customised spiritual vehicles once back home. In this context the eclectic, non-directive, and subject-oriented nature of Taizé's ecumenical spirituality constituted an exceptionally flexible environment for these individual appropriations. In fact, the Community worked like a warehouse in which a variety of languages, symbols, and rituals of different Christian traditions had been themselves ex-corporated from their historical and theological context and eclectically re-articulated in a representation of unity. Rather than being inscribed within Taizé's horizon of ecumenical unity, however, participants' appropriation of these resources was driven by an individual questing and often oriented to the solution of pragmatic concerns. The autonomous and eclectic nature of these interactions has been recognised as a defining aspect of contemporary religion, for which languages and practices become cultural resources freely available to individuals' creative use (Barker and Beckford 2008: 223-24; Beckford 1989#414; Ammerman 2010; Hervieu-Léger 1999). This autonomy can even extend beyond the range of religious institutions' formal expressions and involve a blurring of distinctions between sacred and profane, piety and relaxation. This was particularly true in the case of those participants who considered their participation in formal religious practices just as meaningful as their time spent making friends and sharing personal experiences. In

contemporary times, the interiorisation and subjectivisation of the practice of pilgrimage implies that the boundaries of what is defined as of sacred significance become more difficult to discern, as what is of sacred significance is individually chosen and created rather than received (Tomasi 2002: 19; McGuire 2008; Barker and Beckford 2008: 227-28). This implies that individuals' search is multidirectional and does not follow the boundaries of what is externally defined as sacred and profane, which may coincide with what is institutionally mediated as sacred or, alternatively, be creatively subverted or entirely rejected (Tomasi 2002: 20).

At this stage, however, it is important to highlight that if young people creatively inhabited their experience at Taizé, their journey was not necessarily conducted in isolation. As we have seen above, the possibility to access other young people was one of the most powerful motivations in interviewees' choice to join the pilgrimage. This finding is not uncommon in the study of large youth gatherings. In their research on young pilgrims participating in the Catholic World Youth Day, Norman and Johnson point out that *'a key motive for religious travel [...] are [...] events where the traveller can find a unique access to the "other"'*. (Norman and Johnson 2011: 13). In the specific case of Taizé, the significance of others could be situated at multiple levels. The first could be found in the functioning of the small groups, whose importance emerged with clarity in participants' comments. Young people creatively appropriated them as a space in which they could objectify their experiences and share them with others. In their judgement, these small circles worked as hermeneutical communities that helped them in their holistic activity of giving shape and meaning to their life narratives; furthermore, they worked as providers of emotional support, individual validation, and personal meaning.

The role of intersubjectivity is an important theme in pilgrimage studies literature (Frey 1998; Skinner 2012: 99-121; Coleman and Elsner 2002). Practices involving an objectification of inner emotions and experiences—such as prayer and exchanges with other pilgrims—can become midwives of personal renewal and emotional healing. Articulating a person's story implies giving shape to a formless succession of events. Particularly when this act is shared with others, as it happened in Taizé's small groups, it involves a social form of hermeneutics in which alternative forms of being, interests, and values can be explored and tested. Self-narratives can thus be reworked and new, meaningful connections can emerge (Coleman and Elsner 2002: 5). The result, as interviewees repeatedly affirmed, was the emergence of a renewed and more integrated self and a clearer sense of purpose. In separating young people from their ordinary

context, pilgrimage was felt to be an exceptionally capable vehicle for this kind of exploration, as it allowed participants to be free from ordinary distractions and intensely present to their questing. Young people fully welcomed and embraced their experience of alienation as an opportunity to journey into their being (Skinner 2012: 116). In my view, it is in this process that a form of *communitas* could be seen at work among the pilgrims journeying at Taizé. A striking element in participants' comments was, in fact, their extraordinary spontaneity and openness to share experiences with other pilgrims and, in some cases, interviewees' explicit reliance on others' wisdom for help through a stretch of their walk. What emerged from this picture was a sense of mutual responsibility in listening to each other's stories and practicing what Ricoeur has defined as '*narrative hospitality*' (Ricoeur and Kearney 1996: 8; Skinner 2012: 103). In his study of the Camino, Rupp calls this relational form '*existential friendship*' (Rupp 2005: 214). These temporary relations, as admittedly many of those formed by Taizé's pilgrims were, '*compress meaning and worth into contact that is paradoxically both intense and relaxed*' (Skinner 2012: 109). At Taizé, this specific form of *communitas* was founded on the sense of having a common road to travel, a similar work to perform, in a liminal and compressed space where life was stripped bare and left open to new possibilities. For the expressive freedom these relations implied, they could only be possible among strangers not connected to a person's ordinary life. Commenting on his journeying with other pilgrims on the road to Compostela, Egan concurs with this interpretation:

*The idea of giving ill's a definite name and setting them forth into a diffuse semiotic chain of worldly discourses seems almost to set them free, without proper charge of them, a potentially dangerous gambit among one's friends at home. Once Michael had done the work he had come to do, he could and did walk away from me when he wished. The raw struggle I witnessed and accompanied did not tie us to any bond that had to outlast our time on the pilgrimage; what had haunted him had been embodied and addressed in what he came to call his 'laboratory experience'. (Skinner 2012: 113)*

In a similar way, for my participants these relationships, while meaningful and intense, were also felt as temporary and fluctuating. At the end of the week, pilgrims regularly collected each other's Facebook contacts or sometimes an e-mail address but rarely, if ever, did they plan a continuity other than meeting again, perhaps, on a further occasion at Taizé.

Coming to the final part of this analysis, it is important to notice that the existential focus of these exchanges appeared to be coupled, in interviewees' perspective, with a dominant lack of interest for doctrinal concerns, a finding that, especially as related to young people, finds confirmation in other studies (Margry 2008: 26; Harris 2010). If the foundation of *communitas* is

situated in the awareness of being involved, as individuals, in a similar holistic search for meaning and purpose, the diversity of the other becomes an important resource and a source of interest, as it enriches my own journey. As highlighted by participants, in this framework a core element of Taizé's attractiveness becomes its capacity to give access to the 'other'. In this context, Brother Roger's horizon of the ascetic pursuit of Christian reconciliation becomes anachronistic: his dream of ecumenical unity appears to be a residual expression of a modernist project, now outdated by a relational, subject-centred ecclesiology of custom-built networks. In a study on the religious and ethical trends emerging from the process of European integration, French sociologist Jean-Paul Willaime highlights how postmodernity might be considered as a 'post-ecumenical' age, in which diversity is valued and preserved as a resource, rather than being considered as a source of scandal (Willaime 2002: 96). In his view, this trend needs to be understood within the context of a wider movement toward the progressive homogenisation of beliefs and values that tends to converge around an essential core. This phenomenon particularly affects the younger generations (Willaime 2002: 89). In the highly diverse context of Taizé's pilgrimages, this common core, in my view, could be situated at a basic level in a reciprocal acknowledgement of each one's questing and in an ethos of mutual hospitality for the individual diversity of these journeys (Hervieu-Léger 1999). In this perspective, the issue of Christianity's fragmentation, which constituted Brother Roger's pivotal concern, loses its relevance.

While the significance of the interpretive communities created by young people in their small groups could certainly be considered as one of the central findings of my study, one last aspect of the role of the other at Taizé needs to be explored in this final part of my analysis. This is related to the sense of plausibility and validation interviewees derived from being part of a temporary community of thousands of other young people. In his practical theological study on the participants in the World Youth Day (Rymarz 2008), Rymarz emphasises how Catholic pilgrims perceived the com-presence of large numbers of other young people as one of the most meaningful aspects of their pilgrimage. Interpreting this finding in light of Smith and Denton's research (Smith and Denton 2005), Rymarz argues that large youth gatherings provide youth with a sense of plausibility for their faith. My findings confirmed this dynamic, although in the pluralistic and non-directive context of Taizé, this sense of plausibility was not invested to validate a single denominational identity (Rymarz 2008; Hervieu-Léger 1999) but a range of different individual options, depending on each pilgrim's subjective journey. Thus,

attending Taizé's large worship services helped Jack to overcome his sense of isolation as a young believer within the circle of his university friends and in his ageing Anglican parish. As a result, this experience strengthened his missionary dedication to openly share his Christian faith. Alex's cyclical visits to Taizé and his intense exchanges with fellow 'Taizé believers' strengthened the plausibility of his commitment to what he understood as the Community's mission and validated his self-perceived calling as agent of change in the world; for Roberta, who rejected Christ's role and accepted the Buddhist idea of reincarnation, being part of a highly diverse and tolerant community like the one gathered at Taizé validated her view of an all-accepting God and further consolidated her perception of the narrow-mindedness of the Anglican parish she usually attended. In her view, the gathered community of Taizé embodied something bigger, an imagined movement of seekers individually involved in a mysterious and diverse search for meaning, a largeness of which she felt a part, beyond the suffocating walls of her small parish. In my view, these and other examples evidenced that, as far as my group of interviewees was concerned, participation in a pilgrimage to the Community was generally appropriated as a resource to validate and further consolidate a personal trajectory. In this sense, my findings concur with the conclusions of Bowman's study, according to which pilgrims' journeys are imagined, defined, and articulated within the domain of each individual's culture. This implies that at the shrines where pilgrims go to pursue their quests they often find *'little other than that which they already expect to encounter'* (Bowman 2000: 120-21).

## 5.5 Conclusion

Building on the insights provided by the field of pilgrimage studies, this chapter contrasted the theological script mediated by the Community's practice with young people and participants' interpretations of their pilgrimage experience. As hypothesised in the introduction to this thesis, the analysis highlighted significant divergences between the objective theology embedded in Taizé's expressions and young people's subjective understandings. From an institutional perspective, the research showed how, through strategies of distancing, restructuring, and levelling, the Taizé Community stages a prophetic enactment of an implicitly dualistic, anti-structural utopia that is presented as the ideal horizon of pilgrims' ascetic commitment. Against this theological narrative, the analysis revealed that young people used the generative space opened by their temporary separation from their ordinary lives to engage in individual journeys

towards an inner centre of meaning, often quite distant from the destination proposed by the Community's mediation. The reflexive vehicle designed by Taizé to lead individuals on a pilgrimage from self-centredness to active commitment was thus appropriated to conduct more personal explorations that bridged transcendent and immanent concerns. Young people's holistic questing presented, in this sense, close affinities with the concept of *'lived religion'* (McGuire 2008), which was defined as an ongoing activity oriented to incarnate the divine in ordinary lives, as part of a continuous search for individual meaning, renewal, and healing. What happened at Taizé among young people was, therefore, not otherworldly; rather, it could be situated at the intersection between spiritual and mundane concerns, as related to the unfolding of young people's everyday realities. Throughout this incarnational process, pilgrimage provided an exceptionally effective and flexible structure that enabled pilgrims to embody their questing in acts that not only represented but effectively accomplished an individual transformation through reflexive, bodily, emotional, and intersubjective experiences. In the freedom created by their temporary alienation from ordinary life, participants could thus intensely focus on their searching and experiment with alternative ways of building their self-narratives in dialogue with themselves, God, and others. Rather than following the Community's theological script, young people's appropriation of their experience was also autonomous and eclectic, predominantly oriented by their individual trajectories. From this viewpoint, Taizé worked as a rich warehouse of languages, codes, symbols, and practices from which pilgrims freely drew to conduct their personal searching. On this journey, a particularly important resource was represented by intersubjective exchanges. It was, in fact, in young people's *'spiritual conversations'* (Ammerman 2014: 19) and in their messy blurring of sacred and mundane explorations that they tried to find a response to the demand of incarnational wisdom left unfulfilled by the Community's theological dualism. In this perspective, the research confirmed the initial hypothesis concerning the distance between the ascetic spirituality expressed by Taizé's mediation and young people's holistic aspirations. This complex picture suggests important reflections on the use of pilgrimage in a youth ministry context. Therefore, it is to the exploration of the theological and ministry implications of my analysis that I will turn in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 6 - Journeys towards fullness**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This final chapter aims to bring together different strands of the conversation developed throughout this research in order to articulate a critical theological reflection on its findings. In the first part of this thesis, I argued that Taizé's youth pilgrimages are an arena of competing and often profoundly divergent theological interpretations. More specifically, my hypothesis suggested the existence of a significant contrast between the theology objectively mediated by the Community in its pilgrimages and young people's appropriation of these experiences as a vehicle of holistically oriented, subject-centred explorations. To substantiate such a claim, I focused in Chapters One and Three on defining the theological meanings underlying the Community's meditation. Drawing from primary sources and scholarly studies in Chapter One, I demonstrated that from the beginning Taizé's commitment to ministering to young people was conceived as an instrument to realise its core ecumenical mission.

Building upon this foundational insight, I reconstructed in Chapter Three the connection between the Community's ecumenical theology and the shape of its ministry to young people. The chapter showed that Brother Roger's Johannine emphasis on believers' union with Christ and each other translated into a form of spirituality that contained implicit dualistic elements and was conceived as an asceticism—a disciplined pursuit of a transformative communion with Christ, leading believers to reconcile and embrace all humankind in a universal brotherhood. Within this horizon, ministering to youth implied involving them in an ascetic pursuit of unity, as partners and agents of the Community's ecumenical mission.

Having set these foundations, I conducted an empirical investigation (Chapter Four) based on my participation in two youth pilgrimages to Taizé organised by Church of England institutions. The use of qualitative research methods allowed me, on the one hand, to further my understanding of the theological text embedded in Taizé's practical performance and, on the other hand, to analyse young people's appropriation of its mediated expressions. My findings were subsequently discussed from an interdisciplinary perspective that involved the use of insights drawn from the field of pilgrimage studies and the sociology of religion. The results of this empirical study confirmed the hypothesis at the basis of my thesis. As I argued in Chapter Five, the Community's pilgrimages emerged as a crossroad of complex interactions between their objective theological meaning and a variety of subjective interpretations closely connected

to each individual's spiritual and existential trajectory. As a result, the very liminal structure designed by Taizé to lead pilgrims away from the ordinary into a dualistic, utopian haven of innocence was appropriated by participants to conduct personal explorations that bridged transcendent and immanent concerns and attempted to restore meaning in their fragmented lives.

Following Swinton and Mowat's methodological approach (Swinton and Mowat 2006), the objective of this chapter will now consist in reflecting on the theological significance of these findings. The underlying *telos* of Practical Theology, in fact, goes beyond acquiring new knowledge; it aims at building upon newly acquired understandings to generate a deeper understanding of their theological implications and stimulate more faithful forms of practice. Following Barth (Barth et al. 2002), Swinton and Mowat emphasise that theology is, in essence, a form of worship, as its aim is to investigate the things of God with a spirit of praise and wonder (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 259). This understanding particularly applies to practical theology. Critically engaging the reality of Christian practice should never exclude researchers' awareness of God's redemptive workings amidst the imperfect concreteness of believers' practical expressions. It is my conviction that this divine presence accompanied young people's journeys at Taizé. The aim of this last chapter will be to reflect on the ways in which the insights gathered so far may help in discerning those redemptive workings.

This reflective task is made particularly relevant by the contemporary popularity of pilgrimage. While mainline church attendance is declining in Britain and Europe, Christian pilgrimage and religious tourism are increasing, often promoted by church leaders who appropriate these resources to support church attendance and supplement local ministry (Reader 2007; Margry 2008: 26; Bartholomew and Hughes 2004: xii). As evidenced in the previous chapters, this was also the case of the youth pilgrimage under study. However, Swinton and Mowat warn against a purely 'technological' use of practices, dictated more by pragmatic considerations of their potential effects than by a clear understanding of their theological implications (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 18). Due to the contemporary resurgence of interest in spirituality, this issue has become particularly relevant for the debate on the appropriation of ancient spiritual practices such as pilgrimage (Peterson 1992: 90; Dyas 2004: 103-04).

In line with this understanding, the next section of the chapter (6.2) will discuss the theological significance of the most important finding of this research, the divergence between the meanings objectively mediated by the Community's practice and young people's appropriation.



The analysis of this divide will highlight, on the one hand, the dangers involved in an uncritical embracing of Taizé's theological mediation while, on the other hand, it will lay the essential groundwork to understand the subjective significance of these experiences in a contemporary ministry context. The following section (6.3) will continue this reflection by focusing on a second, significant finding emerging from my empirical study: the centrality of practice as vehicle of young people's spiritual and existential journeying. In this context, I will further explore the discrepancy between the theology mediated by Taizé's use of spiritual practice and young people's participation; furthermore, I will suggest that pilgrims' appropriation conveyed a more coherent and, in my view, theologically faithful way to inhabit the spiritual structure made available by the Community. The next section (6.4) will continue my analysis by concentrating on a third element emerging from my empirical research: pilgrims' frequent use of life stories as a way to practice a spiritually oriented form of narrative hermeneutics. Drawing from the sapiential tradition of the Scripture, I will identify their attempts as a form of 'practical theology', aimed at bridging the divine and the human and making sense of life in its relatedness to God. In light of this orientation, I will also discuss some of the deficits of Taizé's theological mediation. Finally, the last section (6.5) will further explore the theological significance of young people's interpretive communities in their pilgrimage experience. The reflection will focus on the collective dimension of youth's sapiential efforts and on the significance of horizontal forms of religious communication, such as conversation and life narrative for the life of the Church.

## **6.2 Contemporary journeys: a tentative map**

As recalled in the introduction to this chapter, the objective of this thesis was to verify the existence of a discrepancy between the theology objectively mediated by the Taizé Community in its youth pilgrimage practice and participants' subjective interpretations. As the two previous chapters showed, my empirical investigation confirmed the initial hypothesis. The significance of this finding, therefore, will constitute the subject of my theological engagement in the present section; furthermore, as the second part of this chapter will make clear, the divide between the Community's and participants' interpretations will constitute a major thematic thread throughout the chapter.

From an institutional viewpoint, my reconstruction of the theological text mediated by Taizé's practice revealed that the axis of its performance is a restorationist motif of return to the ideal of

unity incarnated by the first Christian community (Acts 4:32). For Brother Roger, this model embodied the mandate committed by Christ to his followers in John 17.21, which constituted the foundational text of his theology. The prophetic enactment of the archetype of Acts 4.32 by a core group of virtuoso believers—the monastic community of the Brothers—is conceived as the mode of Taizé's transformative action (Weber, Gerth, and Mills 2009: 287-89). In the Community's practice, young pilgrims' transitional participation in this ongoing performance is intended as an embodied pedagogy of communion with God and others. This requires not only a mechanical participation in a staged enactment, but a journey of personal transformation during which pilgrims are invited to practice the same virtuoso form of contemplative spirituality modelled by the Brothers.

The mission of Taizé, in fact, is not only to be the theatre for a symbolic performance but also to provide a contemplative vehicle through which individuals' inner longing for unity with God may surface and transform them into active partners of the Community's ecumenical mission. This conversion can be interpreted as the spiritual destination of the interior pilgrimage designed by Taizé; in this perspective, physical and inner journeying are intimately related. The adoption of a pilgrimage framing, which involves distancing from the ordinary into an extra-ordinary dimension, constitutes a liminal space that makes the Community's utopian representation possible. The creation of this canopy allows Taizé to involve pilgrims in an inner journey of spiritual discovery that involves a radical restructuring of their lives, which are homogeneously synchronised around one sacred centre.

As I have argued above, the implications of this practical articulation are of crucial importance. As embodied theology, pilgrimage adds a supplementary layer of meaning to Taizé's restorationist narrative. In this framework, accessing the divine requires virtuoso spiritual practice and radical detachment from the world into a wilderness of divine epiphanies, a neatly focused, utopian anti-structure that simplifies and conceals the unsettling complexity of ordinary life. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the inherent dualism of the Community's theology, together with the elitism of its virtuoso-oriented spiritual model, that caused most participants to marginalise them as inapplicable to the navigation of everyday life. As seen in the previous chapters, in young people's appropriation the inner destination of the journey designed by Taizé was replaced by more urgent, subject-focused pursuits.

From a theological viewpoint, it is important to highlight the dangers implicit in the narrative mediated by Taizé. The first consists in communicating a disincarnated form of Docetist

theology, according to which encountering God requires extra-ordinary places and times dualistically separated from individuals' ordinary landscapes and life schedules. Furthermore, it implies an elitist vision of spirituality: in its ideal expression, life with God is modelled by the practice of an elite group of virtuoso specialists who withdraw from the world to fully commit to the practice of heroic spiritual virtues, an example hardly accessible to those living in the messy reality of the everyday (Weber, Gerth, and Mills 2009: 287-89).

An additional danger implicit in this form of mediation is that of reductionism—the tendency to compartmentalise spirituality as a series of isolated, 'high' experiences, often disconnected from ordinary life. Reader has highlighted this tendency toward compartmentalisation as one of the main reasons for the contemporary popularity of pilgrimage practice (Reader 2007). These dangers are not uniquely connected to the case of Taizé's pilgrimage practice. From the Church Fathers to Martin Luther and John Calvin, the theological value of pilgrimage was at the centre of intense debates for centuries (Bartholomew and Hughes 2004). Interestingly, in these discussions pilgrimage practice was predominantly considered as '*strong on experience but weak on theology*' (Dyas 2004).

The objections raised by pilgrimage critics closely paralleled the issues highlighted above. Against the New Testament affirmation of the 'Christification' of all reality (Lincoln 2004), pilgrimage implicitly mediated a hierarchisation of space, a geography of extra-ordinary places intrinsically more conducive to divine encounters than the ordinary landscape of human living. A similar hierarchisation also applied to time, as leaving to go on a pilgrimage implied the idea that the sacred needed to be pursued in the form of 'high' spiritual experiences confined to extra-ordinary times. As a result, rather than being an aid for believers' faith, pilgrimage was often experienced as an isolated experience that failed to feed back into a sustained spiritual commitment in ordinary life; in many cases, it encouraged spiritual reductionism as it became a surrogate for daily closeness to God (Dyas 2004: 104). As in the case under study, the practice was seen as mediating a form of spiritual elitism that emphasised the primacy of a virtuoso spirituality of withdrawal over the precarious struggle of living as disciples in a decentred, sinful world (Dyas 2004; Walker 2004). Rather than encouraging integration between faith and living, pilgrimage mediated a theology implicitly opposing a spiritual realm inhabiting extra-ordinary places, times, and conditions to an ordinary, soulless materiality only faintly lit by a divine presence.

However, as highlighted by this case study, despite these critical elements the enduring success of pilgrimage is connected to its great flexibility as a practice, which allows it to become an embodied vehicle for journeys whose subjective destination can be very differently interpreted. Thus, while the Christian tradition is generally critical of this practice, it also manifests oscillations between a purist position of rejection and a more open attitude, generally inspired by an incarnational awareness of the human need to embody individuals' search for God's presence in tangible forms (Dyas 2004: 102-03; Bartholomew 2004). As in the case of Taizé, the theological issues raised by this practice revolved around matters of integration: how could pilgrimage contribute to alert individuals' eyes to God's continuous, active presence anywhere in the world, rather than focus their sight on a few special places? How could it nurture and support their ongoing faith growth rather than reduce it to a few 'high' spiritual experiences? In the early and medieval Christian tradition, a solution to this dilemma was found in framing these potentially isolated experiences within an overarching theological narrative that gave them meaning and purpose in relation to believers' entire existence (Dyas 2004). This narrative emerged from a rich heritage that could be found both in the Bible and in the writings of the early Fathers, according to which life could be understood as a journey towards a spiritual destination (Dyas 2004). Rather than being a meandering exile in an indecipherable landscape, existence could thus be imagined as a purposeful itinerary through a geography that could become divinely inhabited and understandable. Life's apparently indecipherable succession of events thus became a meaningful story. The image involved a sense of challenge, the idea that faith was a dynamic and often mysterious path of growth in which the destination was never conquered once and for all.

The theological advantages of this framing were numerous: it provided a hermeneutical perspective for human life, with its unpredictable shifting from joy to sorrow; furthermore, it offered a sense of security as it emphasised the idea of God's loving presence at every turn of an individual's life path; it encouraged Christians to entertain a close contact with God in their ordinary life and religious practice; finally, it provided a context in which a broad range of different spiritual experiences could be incorporated and against which their value could be assessed (Dyas 2004: 102). The spiritual emphasis moved back to a believer's ordinary reality, while at the same time allowing enough space for pilgrimage to be integrated as a temporary, particularly intense transition in a traveller's life journey towards her destination, a space where a specific, spiritually oriented hermeneutics of existence could be learned and practiced. The

flexibility of this overarching metaphor allowed the end of the voyage to be variously defined as the holy city of Revelation or—as in mystical literature—the inner place within the soul where God could be encountered. These often complementary meanings always emphasised the lifelong dimension of a believer's spiritual quest and commitment.

This theological framework, with its emphasis on faith as a lens through which the entirety of a life's journey could be interpreted, provides a stimulating background against which Taizé's theological mediation and the subjective trajectories highlighted by interviewees' interpretations of their pilgrimage experience can be analysed.

As repeatedly highlighted in previous chapters (three and five), the essential conditions for young people's subjective appropriation of the Community's theological mediation are provided by what can be considered as the most successful aspect of Taizé's ministry: its emphasis on a psychologically oriented form of spirituality intended to reconnect individuals to their selves, heal their inner divisions, and help them recover an existential and spiritual meaning to their lives.

Brother Roger's theological anthropology, in particular, constituted a powerful foundation for this vision. In his view, all individuals could be considered as 'implicit believers' moved in their quests by what he considered as 'the image of God' still impressed in them: the longing to recover their lost communion with their Creator. By providing a reflectively oriented environment, the *initial* aim of the Community's spirituality was to allow individuals to focus on their inner brokenness and search for meaning and, through this process, to become aware of their implicit desire for union with God. In this perspective, through physical distancing, life re-centring and restructuring, and practices such as silence, individual and corporate prayer, meditative singing, and intersubjective exchanges, Taizé's theological mediation successfully creates a spiritual space where young people pursue their individual quests for meaning and for God's presence in their lives.

As highlighted by the interviews, Taizé's continued commitment to make this subjectively oriented spiritual canopy available was undoubtedly considered as the main reason of its attractiveness among young people. What appeared to be missing from their narratives, however, was Brother Roger's emphasis on the fact that this introspective journey was never to be considered as the main objective of the Community's theological mediation. In his thought, in fact, this transition could only be seen as a provisional step leading to young people's ascetic involvement in the Community's core ecumenical mission of reform and revitalization of the Church.

In this sense, what young people's voices suggested was that Taizé effectively fulfilled the initial part of his ministry, which consisted in providing them with a spiritually centred environment where they could refocus their lives and letting their desire for God's presence emerge as part of their search for personal meaning. However, rather than pursuing the ascetic destination pointed out by the Community, with its implicit dismissal of individuals' earthly concerns, participants appropriated their pilgrimage as a reflexive vehicle allowing them to travel faster on their own individual journeys. The importance of their perspective lay in the underlying conviction that life itself, in its 'uncut' reality, could be porous to the transcendent and inhabited by God's active presence. Spending time as pilgrims at the Community involved giving centrality to a specific, spiritually oriented hermeneutics, through which life's uneven and meandering paths could reveal a meaningful orientation and purpose. Pilgrims' interpretive attempts thus became part of a lifelong quest for a fuller existence on a journey sometimes uncertain but always open to change and growth. Past experiences were reinterpreted and re-appropriated, and in this process young people found a new spiritual and existential awareness, fresh perspectives on their self, and a stronger trust in God's companionship along the path of ordinary life. In this sense, young people's appropriation of their pilgrimage experience reflected the integrative impulse that was at the centre of early and medieval Christian responses to the practice of pilgrimage.

This form of interaction has close parallels in the findings of other studies on pilgrimage (Harris 2010, 2013; Reader 2007). Participants' dismissal of the ascetic spiritual calling mediated by the Community reflects some fundamental shifts in the landscape of contemporary spirituality. As illustrated by youth's experiences at Taizé, today life is still conceived as a lifelong journey, but the path to individuals' 'inner Jerusalem' has significantly changed. According to Taylor, this change is rooted in a radical shift in the contemporary understanding of the 'good' (Taylor 2007: 474). This fundamentally alters the geography of the landscape that today's individuals must traverse in order to find their destination. The contemporary scenery is marked by a democratisation of a once restricted Romantic expressivism, facilitated by the emergence of consumer culture. Within this framework, each individual has to find her 'authentic' path to full self-expression and realisation, beyond any form of externally imposed conformity. In the religious domain, this turn leads to what Taylor defines as the '*post-Durkheimian dispensation*' (Taylor 2007: 489), in which individual choices have been disconnected from external, grand projects and not only need to be autonomously chosen but to make sense in terms of a

person's spiritual and existential development. The search occurs now for its own sake: the focus is on finding an individuals' life path—or 'finding oneself.' This shift implies a new centrality of the ordinary dimension of life. Thus, the interviewees involved in this case study—all of whom were practicing Christians—manifested, to different extents, a similar focus: their faith was inextricably connected to an individual quest for meaning and fullness, for which it constituted a key hermeneutical and practical resource. In the contemporary expressivist context this orientation has profound implications, as it implies the necessity for religion to use 'subtler languages'. These need to make manifest a higher reality in ways that resonate with believers' ordinary experience. The emphasis is on seeking

*A kind of unity of the self [...] a space of feeling [...] and a reclaiming of the body [...] The stress is on unity, integrity, holism, individuality; their language often invokes 'harmony, balance, flow, integrations, being at one, centred'. (Taylor 2007: 507)*

In this sense, the current dispensation emphasises the importance of deeply felt personal insights and forms of interpretive wisdom that may start from individuals' journeys and open their eyes to a different way of 'seeing' and making sense of their lives. In this context, the experiential, subject-centred spirituality mediated by Taizé and its emphasis on horizontal, intersubjective forms of communication assumes great importance. In fact, post-Durkheimian religiosity expresses itself primarily as an experiential quest that starts with no a priori exclusions; as such, its dominant vehicle is spiritual practice. In Taylor's view, dismissing this religiosity as an offspring of an immanently oriented wellbeing culture would be simplistic (Taylor 2007: 594-617). Participants' motivations to join the pilgrimage were often connected to a sense of malaise vis à vis an everyday reality they perceived as centreless, oppressive, and alienating. Going to Taizé aimed at stepping out from the ordinary only to re-appropriate it from a different perspective, by recovering a sense of purpose and God's presence in an apparently meaningless succession of events. According to Taylor, it is precisely the flatness of immanence and the emptiness of the accelerating cycles of contemporary society that create a sense of malaise in contemporary individuals. This awakens a desire to recover a transcendent centre, a perception of a reality often only barely glimpsed under the surface of the everyday, in special moments of awareness (Taylor 2007: 309). Contemporary pilgrims' journeys to their inner Jerusalem, the space in their soul when they can encounter Christ, are thus inextricably connected to a self-expressive quest that is not selfish but seeks to discover a higher reality to give life purpose, integration, and harmony. It is this pursuit that enables individuals to come to 'see' God's presence, to re-enchant the ordinary and give life a hermeneutical perspective and

internal coherence. In my understanding, this was also the purpose of young people's inner journeys at Taizé.

Taylor's reconstruction of post-Durkheimian religiosity provides an explanation for interviewees' dominant tendency to marginalise the dualistic and ascetic aspects of Taizé's mediation; furthermore, it points out the reasons for participants' focusing on resources that could support their interpretive attempts at bridging divine and human, sacred and profane. In this perspective, the gap between the objective and subjective dimensions in Taizé's mediation has important implications. The Community's ascetic emphasis and marginalisation of young people's holistic concerns implied, in fact, that its mediation of the Gospel narrative was dismissed as not capacious enough to support their individual and communal searching. As a result, pilgrims' attempts at shaping a meaningful, God-inhabited narrative of their existence mostly took place as autonomous, self-oriented appropriations of Taizé's resources. Theological and ritual materials were creatively incorporated to sustain personal journeys that, because of this gap, were sometimes only tenuously oriented by the sources of the Scripture and the Christian tradition.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the main motivation of young people's participation in a Taizé pilgrimage lay in its ability to constitute an embodied vehicle of a self-expressive, subject-focused quest. Despite theological weakness and ambiguities, young people's pilgrimage experience constituted a space in which they encountered Christ, the Spirit was at work, transformation occurred, and a new hermeneutics of life could be shaped. This awareness implies the necessity for researchers to not dismiss young people's appropriation as devoid of theological significance. As recently argued by theologian Pete Ward,

*Recognition of the mixed nature of the Church, as both positive and negative, is... fundamental in working towards theologically informed transformation. There is a simple reason for this. I believe transformation grows out of the places where there is life and there is light. (Ward 2015: 5)*

This implies seriously considering the complexity of lived faith and allowing it to be reoriented and renewed in a more theologically faithful direction. It is in this perspective that I will, therefore, continue my reflection on the theological significance of the main findings of my research.

### **6.3 Vehicles for the journey: the significance of practice**

Following my exploration of the theological and practical implications of this research, it is important to highlight that, beyond emphasising the holistic nature of young people's searching,



the research findings pointed out the salience of practice as primary vehicle of their journeys. In this sense, pilgrims' questing was holistic not only in its scope and purpose but also in the mode of its interaction with the rich spiritual resources made available by the Taizé Community. Participants' searching involved, in fact, their entire being—the body and the senses, affective and cognitive capabilities—in a deeply transformative experience.

Research has highlighted pilgrimage's capacity to holistically engage an individual's intellectual, sensual, and affective dimensions as one of the key reasons of its contemporary popularity (Harris 1999; Harris 2010, 2013; Reader 2007). In the context of this study, practice constituted an integrative structure, an embodied language by which young people could express their faith and make God present as a partner in their efforts to find healing, renewal, and a new centredness. Its significance was particularly well illustrated by the crucial role of ritual mobility as a vehicle of spiritual and existential transformation. Rather than being a form of escapism, mobility gave tangible reality to young people's desire to restore contact with God and their inner self, thus authenticating it. Physically distancing from ordinary life freed an inner space that allowed participants to express different aspects of their self, explore life from an alternative perspective, and acquire a new spiritual awareness to face their ongoing journey. In this sense, mobility opened opportunities of spiritual imagination for young people to develop a new experiential wisdom and weave spiritual meaning into their life narratives. The physical experience of travelling and temporarily occupying a liminal position provided pilgrims with a unique form of knowledge that holistically involved body, feelings, and intellectual capabilities as integral part of a reflexive, transformative process. However, the significance of practice clearly extended beyond the specific role of ritual mobility, as manifested by young people's experiences at Taizé and back home. Spending time in silence and prayer, attending worship services, engaging in repetitive singing, or intersubjective exchanges were all holistic, experiential means through which the invisible was made visible and active amidst young people's attempts at interpreting the meandering appearance of their journey.

The significance of religious practice has been highlighted by numerous studies covering a variety of research areas. These range from the sociology of religion (Orsi 2005; McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2007, 2014; Wuthnow 2007; Roof 1999) to pilgrimage studies (Coleman and Eade 2004; Badone and Roseman 2004; Harris 1999; Harris 2010, 2013; Reader 2007), to theology (Bartholomew and Hughes 2004; Smith 2009, 2013; Anderson and Foley 2001; Volf and Bass 2002; Bass and Copeland 2010). Part of this literature has specifically focused on the

epistemological role of the body, the senses, and the emotions alongside that of the intellect as one of the key characteristics of contemporary spirituality (Taylor 2007; Wuthnow 2007; Roof 1999).

According to the findings of my research, however, practice played profoundly divergent roles in the Community's objective mediation and in pilgrims' subjective experience. From an objective viewpoint, Taizé's practice mediates a specific theological anthropology according to which all human beings carry an inner longing to recover their lost unity with God. This Augustinian theme constitutes the foundation of an epistemology that emphasises the role of intuition, perception, the body, and the senses over that of the intellect (Schutz 1962b: 17, 55; Roger 2003: 10-12, 19-20; Feldmann 2007-6, 20, 78). In terms of spiritual practice and liturgical performance, this emphasis on an inner desire for unity with God implies the necessity to create spaces that allow the Spirit to bring individuals' longing to awareness. Embodied practice is conceived as a vehicle for this desire to surface to individuals' attentiveness and become 'real'. This can happen while articulating a simple invocation, in a pilgrim's poor stammering, or in a bodily gesture like kneeling or laying down in surrender (Roger 1981: 18, 19-20, 41-42).

This epistemology justifies the Community's prevailing recourse to expressions like silence, visual symbols, meditative music, repetitive singing, prayer, meditation, and corporate ritual actions. Worship, in particular, is conceived as a space where individuals should physically and metaphorically step outside the alienating flatness of the ordinary to concretely experience the inbreaking of an alternative reality (Roger 1986: 66-67). In this respect, Brother Roger repeatedly emphasised the necessity for liturgy to mediate otherworldliness over transcendence, an invitation that further points out the underlying dualism of Taizé's theological mediation (Roger 1986: 66-67). The ultimate aim of this spirituality is to turn individuals from self-centredness to a selfless, sacrificial commitment to the mission of bringing all humankind to unity with God and each other (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 24-25; Roger 1981: 50; Roger and Chisholm 1984: 42-43). In the Community's mediation, this focus marginalises any concern for the concrete, ordinary dimension of young people's living, which is dismissed in the name of a superior, utopian ideal.

This view can be considered as an expression of a theological tradition that has historically neglected to focus on earthly human flourishing as an appropriate Christian goal. In this perspective Christ's self-emptying implies that the appropriate Christian posture is selflessness and self-sacrifice (Charry 2010, 2012). This motif is strongly present in Brother Roger's

theology, in which the expectation that Christians empty themselves and sacrifice their life for the sake of Christ and the other, to the point of facing martyrdom, has a prominent space (Roger and Chisholm 1980: 48-50, 74-75; Roger 1981: 18, 19, 20-21, 22, 38-39, 86; Roger and Chisholm 1984: 35). In this theological framework, attending to one's own earthly life cannot be conceived as a primary Christian concern (Charry 2012: 234). This implies a paradox in Taizé's theological mediation: while its epistemology emphasises a holistic involvement of individuals' entire being, its soteriology and missiology express a form of Docetist faith that disembodies the meaning of salvation. In his analysis of contemporary self-expressive spirituality, Taylor considers the tendency to marginalise the significance of human life as partial and theologically misguided:

*Christian renunciation can easily slide towards a more Platonic or Stoic ideal. We renounce certain life fulfilments because they are 'lower', because in the final analysis they are not what human life is really about, but ultimately obstacles to our real goal. What is sloughed off doesn't really matter. But this makes nonsense of the sacrifice of Christ. It is precisely because human life is so valuable, part of the plan of God for us, that giving it up has the significance of a supreme act of love. (Taylor 2007: 644)*

In this perspective, young people's appropriation of Taizé's resources points out the necessity for solving this contradiction. From a theological viewpoint, the centrality of the physical, the sensorial, and the affective in worship and spiritual practice implicitly conveys a strong incarnational emphasis, with the conviction that God fully embraces the materiality of human life as a creational gift and a vehicle of encounter with human beings (Smith 2009: 141-43). This implies that, by definition, worship and spiritual practice cannot be otherworldly, as they incarnate in mundane, physical forms—light, darkness, water, wine, bread, a torture instrument and a wounded body, the bodily gestures of prayer—the inbreaking of a salvation that inhabits and transfigures the humblest realities of human life. In this sense, otherworldliness—the lack of engagement with the full reality of earthly living—is, to use Smith's terms, '*a performative contradiction*' (Smith 2009: 141). The sacramental appropriation of earthly realities—our entire being in all its physicality, the materiality of ordinary objects— points out the fact that God meets us in our world. Our earthly life is not just a collateral, marginal attachment of a superior ascetic mission but a place of divine presence and redemptive activity. Worship and spiritual practice then become events of meaning making, liminal spaces from where the world is revealed as a different, God-trodden place, and life is re-centred and called to flourishing.

This understanding implies the necessity of reframing spiritual practice within a theological perspective that may rebalance the tendency embedded in Taizé's theology, as in part of the

Christian tradition, to consider the quest for life fulfilment as a lower goal (Charry 2012: 229). This involves taking into fuller account the biblical testimony about God's active commitment to sustain human flourishing amidst the complex reality of earthly living (Strawn 2012a). In large portions of the Scriptures, fullness is presented not as a wishful quest but as a transformative life practice that does not allow turning away from human hurting, doubts, and imperfections but requires facing them in order to be freed and shape a new hermeneutics of life. In this sense, the nature of biblical fullness runs contrary to spiritual escapism or saccharine simplifications. A powerful example of this practice is represented by the Psalms, which include a large number of lament poems. These can be conceived as embodied expressions allowing petitioners to intellectually, affectively, and sensorially explore their predicament while wrestling with God (Strawn 2012b; Sandage 2012; Brown 2012). These prayers cover a wide range of very concrete human experiences—guilt, fear, doubt, failure, anger, depression, broken relationships—and almost invariably involve an eventual change of perspective in the petitioner, a move from pain and solitude to trust and awareness of God's guiding presence in the complex reality of human living (Strawn 2012b; Sandage 2012; Brown 2012; Brueggemann 1984). This transformative process is both psychological and theological: it involves, in fact, a shift of perspective in the poet's way of constructing and inhabiting his life narrative, yet this change is motivated by an encounter with God (Strawn 2012b; Brueggemann 1984). This takes place in the very midst of an individual's spiritual and existential labouring, in her grabbing the Master's cloak to be made whole again. In Smith's words, '*angels could never have written the Psalms*' (Smith 2009: 139); in fact, it takes all the disorienting messiness of lived experience to truly pray and find healing. This reality is the very place of God's epiphanies and of his obstinate commitment to his creatures' flourishing.

In this perspective, becoming 'fully human' involves a relationship of communion with God (Strawn 2012b; Smith 2009: 168). Practicing fullness implies both human agency and God's gracious activity; wholeness is ultimately conceived as a gift that does not dissolve the challenge but brings development, and with it the ability to face earthly living with hope and to give it a centre and a purpose. For this reason, it is possible to argue that the most fundamental theme underlying the prayers of the Psalms is '*the shaping of human desire*' (Brown 2012: 98). Their sometimes brutal honesty points out the fact that there is no new life in escapism and denial. Rather, wholeness requires wrestling with the fullness of human reality to articulate a new narrative of life. The Old Testament tradition presents numerous examples of this practice

in God's constant attempts at re-articulating Israel's memories, which he reclaims again and again as part of his own story, despite his people's wanderings (Strawn 2012b; Sandage 2012). This theological perspective provides a better frame for young people's appropriation of Taizé's embodied, subject-centred spirituality. Mobility, silence, meditation, prayer, singing, and intersubjective exchanges constituted holistic vehicles through which young people could articulate their inner longing for meaning and wholeness. Through them, they brought their struggles and imperfections in front of God, whom they could physically and emotionally experience as a partner to wrestle with, as a helper and wound healer, as a guide and comforter. As in the prayers of the Psalms, this process could often be expressed in theologically 'incorrect' forms, yet it always involved young people struggling with the harsh reality of their weaknesses, doubts, and sufferings to eventually find healing, wisdom and a new way of appropriating their life narratives in light of God's presence. This transformation never implied a miraculous disappearance of their pains or struggles; rather, it involved growth and a renewed spiritual awareness to continue walking their earthly journey (Strawn 2012b; Brown 2012; Sandage 2012). In this sense, rather than as a vehicle of ascetic self-emptying, young people appropriated the religious resources provided by Taizé to 'practice fullness' and discern God's workings in the crucibles of ordinary life. Spiritual practice was a way for them to invite God to be incarnated in their lives, a companion along their journey. Their whole existence was thus conceived as a theatre of divine activity (Smith 2013: 15). In this context, practices such as participating in a pilgrimage, spending time in silence, meditation, prayer, communal worship, or singing took up a particular sacramental value. This was not connected to a supposed extraordinary quality of these activities but rather to their ability to function as liminal standpoints, hermeneutical vehicles through which God's loving presence in the world could be physically, emotionally, and intellectually experienced, and life could be restored to its authentic meaning. In this context, the role of Taizé could be situated at multiple levels. Firstly, it constituted a discursive arena, a community where young people could individually and communally practice discerning God's footprints in their lives. Secondly, it provided a warehouse of Christian languages, symbols, rituals, and material artefacts young people could appropriate to pursue their ordinary meaning making activity once back home (Ammerman 2014: 33; Ward 2008: 180-89). As evidenced by the research, participants used a broad range of practices and material reminders to embody God's presence in their life and pursue their quest for fullness. Helen had arranged a prayer corner in her room, which she intended to enrich with her Taizé 'memorabilia'

– the music, a candleholder, maybe even a prayer stool; on her side, Roberta planned to add some Taizé music to the playlist she listened to while having her usual walk—her personal practice to recover contact with herself and with God—at the end of a long work day; Sandra and Alex would wear a Taizé pendant to be reminded of the existence of a spiritual centre in their life when overwhelmed by the numbing pace of the everyday; Jack would regularly take a break between classes to practice silence and prayer, while Amber would often sing her favourite Christian song to remember God's care and love, and take comfort in it through her difficult moments. In these practices, young people would not recognise boundaries between different religious traditions or between the sacred and the mundane; rather, they would creatively appropriate different resources they subjectively recognised as carriers of meaning, memories of a divine encounter. These strategies made the immanent porous to the transcendent by introducing pointers to God's presence in the ordinary (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008). In this sense, practices acted as a bridge; together with material objects or the shaping of a specific physical environment, they contributed to make the world a God-dwelted, meaningful, and 'habitable' place (Pink 2012; Vergara 2005; McDannell 1995; Ammerman 2014).

In a very concrete way, therefore, believers' practices can be seen as a locus where Christianity takes shape as a *way of life*, so that we '*might have life, and have it abundantly*' (John 10:10). Practices are vehicles of discernment, ways of transforming our sight and opening it to God's presence, so that we may live fully in unpredictable contexts. The subjective turn and its focus on good living imply a renewed attention to the concrete, lived dimension of the Christian faith. As we have seen in this study, from a theological viewpoint this emphasis is not always unproblematic, as it implies a complex negotiation between Christian beliefs and contemporary culture, yet this process is not new in the history of Christianity. Practice remains in this sense a place of revelation and renewal in the midst of reality, a channel of grace and redemption through which the still, small voice of the Spirit can be heard despite ambiguities and contradictions (Bass and Copeland 2010: xii-xiv; Tanner 2002: 231; Anderson and Foley 2001). For their very nature as strategies by which believers deal with the complexity of human life, however, practices are flexible, open to improvisation and innovation, and often theologically incoherent. As argued by Tanner, it is precisely because they are the result of a complex negotiation between the beliefs mediated by Christian institutions and believers' concrete faith life that they are so vitally important (Tanner 2002: 232). Their opacities, inconsistencies, and

continuous evolving are the very way through which Christians of all times have shaped their way of living and interpreted the reality of the world. As such, reflecting on believers' practices is an act of theological responsibility that is essential for the life of the Church. This is because the study of practice stimulates both our knowledge of God and of ourselves. In fact, practices are a form of inarticulate, embodied faith that although often incoherent and unsystematic—as most believers' 'working theology'—precedes intellectual reflection and expresses a wisdom that may challenge the ways we conceive God's action in the world (Dykstra and Bass 2002: 24).

As demonstrated by the case of Taizé, religious institutions need to be attentive to the uneasy tension between the theology objectively mediated by their expressions and the wide range of negotiations through which individuals appropriate them to shape their life as believers. This disconnection represents a crucial challenge not only for Taizé but also for the Church. Anderson and Foley emphasise the necessity for religious institutions to maintain a continuous, dynamic tension between what they define as the 'mythic' and the 'parabolic' dimensions of faith (Anderson and Foley 2001). Jean-Dominic Crossan (Crossan 1975: 48-57) identifies the category of myth as a story form that tends to reconcile binary oppositions in an ideal representation; parables, on the contrary, have a subversive function, as they tend to challenge myths and show their limitations, contradictions, and ambiguities. Crossan tends to prioritise the destabilising role of parables, an example of which is provided by Jesus' persistent challenging the limits and contradictions of established religious constructions. The vitality of religion requires both dimensions, but parables are the '*house of God*', a place of divine potential (Crossan 1975: 33; Walsh 2001: 124-25). In a similar way, Anderson and Foley emphasise the necessity for religious institutions to maintain a fruitful tension between their mediated theology—what can be defined as their 'mythic' narrative—and believers' 'parabolic', lived reality. In the case of Taizé, its predominant focus on the mythic implies a loss of contact with young people's parabolic voices. This involves a significant divergence between the theological narrative embedded in the Community's rituals and practices and young people's appropriation of these structures to shape their lives as meaningful stories.

A major consequence of this disconnection is a foundational lack of integrity in Taizé's theological mediation, as the mythic pushes complexity and contradictions to the margins of its representation (Anderson and Foley 2001: 34-35). Rather than coming in contact with an embodied, credible account of the Gospel as a way of life, young people are thus left to fill the gaps and contradictions of the parabolic with their own resources. The mythic overcomes the

parabolic and the Gospel is marginalised as virtually irrelevant to youth's journeying, which may result in an overemphasis on individuals' subjectivity. In this framework, the God of the Scriptures, in his complex and challenging interactions with human beings, may become divorced from young people's 'personal', private God and lose part of his power to challenge and reorient their life narratives.

In conclusion, this section has pointed out the necessity for the Taizé Community to bridge the gap between its mythic performance and the parabolic reality of youth's appropriation. Their use of spiritual practice as a space of encounter with God, in a quest to discern a path of meaning and fullness through their existence, highlights the need for Taizé to take into serious theological consideration young people's efforts to identify and pursue a vision of the good life in this world. This trajectory challenges the myth underlying Taizé's performance, in the name of which salvation is disembodied and young people are primarily seen as partners of an ascetic mission. Beyond the surface of the Community's utopian representation, young people's questing points out the need to reframe Taizé's practice within a theological vision that may more faithfully translate the complexity and earthliness of God's involvement in human flourishing, as represented in the testimony of the Scriptures. An essential part of this task should involve the Community engaging in a constructive theological effort to provide young people with an embodiment of the Christian narrative that may be able to intersect and shape their personal stories. It is to the exploration of this theme that I will now turn.

## **6.4 Stories and the Story**

In the previous section, I highlighted how Taizé was appropriated by young people as a temporary community where they could individually and communally practice a specific reading of reality that made it porous to transcendence. Practicing prayer, meditation, singing, or intersubjective exchanges allowed participants to gain new resources and, more generally, to develop a way of thinking and making meaning of their lives that implied the active presence of God. At the heart of this effort was a hermeneutical focus on pilgrims' personal stories, which they tried to rescue from the flatness of immanence and re-appropriate as God-inhabited. Thus, in young people's stories the extraordinary and the ordinary often intimately intertwined. It was precisely the permeability of their practice to the intermingling of sacred and profane, its quality of being a canopy under which ordinary stories could yield the sense of a wider presence, which



made it also highly portable. Practices created a space of sacred attentiveness in which to reimagine everyday realities and give them meaning and order. Their capaciousness invited participants to creatively appropriate them at home in order to reproduce reflexive spaces that allowed their hermeneutic efforts to continue. In its essence, young people's practice constituted an integrative structure that tried to create an interpretive bridge with the divine by incarnating it in the ordinariness of life.

The case exemplified by young people's journeys at Taizé is particularly interesting in light of what De Lange and Roebben define as the contemporary crisis of religious tradition (De Lange and Roebben 2002). Building on a perspective that largely parallels Taylor's emphasis on the self-expressive, subject-centred core of contemporary spirituality (Taylor 2002, 1989, 2007), they argue that today's religious quests are driven by individual motivations that depart from and are intended for the concrete lives of the persons in question. Their background is a self-expressive search for authenticity that promotes an interest for narratives capable of working as mirrors that enable a critical, reflective re-appropriation of ordinary life (De Lange and Roebben 2002). In this context, religious institutions are challenged by what De Lange and Roebben define as a '*correlation gap*' which implies that '*the referential context of faith [...] in which human experience can be elucidated in depth no longer functions*' (De Lange and Roebben 2002: 53). From this perspective, young people's efforts to use spiritual practice as a space to develop a specific, experientially based hermeneutics of life are particularly significant as they highlight a search for a distinctive form of practical, embodied wisdom that may fill that correlation gap. This interpretive focus constitutes an important theological pointer emerging from my research. Vanhoozer emphasises how understanding this specific aspect of contemporary individuals' spiritual questing is at the very centre of any attempt at reaching them:

*We have learned from the postmoderns that knowledge is not disembodied. On this point, postmodernity and incarnational Christian faith are agreed. What is needed, therefore, is a translation of the Gospel that goes beyond conveying propositions – a translation that would concretize the Gospel in individual and communal shapes of living. Proclamations of the Gospel must be accompanied by performances that embody in new situations the wisdom and love of God embodied in the cross.* (Vanhoozer 2003: 24)

In Vanhoozer's view, this implies the necessity of a sapiential turn in theology. As emphasised above, at the heart of the Christian faith lies a deep concern for promoting a specific shape of living. A sapiential turn of theology implies a shift from apodictic truth statements to life narratives and a focus on the Gospel as incarnated stories of good news. In this perspective,

theology is conceived as a form of wisdom whose aim is to help individuals and communities to fashion their existences in accordance with the shape of living shown by God in Christ (Vanhoozer 2003: 24).

This emphasis on the sapiential tradition provides a helpful framework to situate young people's attempts at bridging the sacred and profane, the extraordinary and ordinary, in order to give a meaningful shape to their living. Despite the difficulty to define this complex area of biblical literature, Crenshaw summarises its essential orientation as a '*quest for self-understanding in terms of relationships with things, people, and the Creator*' (Crenshaw 1969: 132), which implies a dominant this-worldly focus. According to Brueggemann (Brueggemann 1997: 688-89), sapiential theology is a form of practical theology that tries to reflect on and give meaning to the experiences of everyday living. In this perspective, theological reasoning is intended as a form of mediation that reveals God as present and actively involved in ordinary experiences. Brueggemann insists that,

*Without this constant articulation and reflection, the discerned fabric of Yahweh's creation might disappear from view, and life could devolve to a practice of discrete, technical operations, which would diminish the joy, significance, and well-being of shared human life. (Brueggemann 1997: 698)*

In Israel this form of theological mediation took the shape of a communal practice of interpretive speaking. However, confining this form of mediation only to a specific genre would be reductive, as the orientation towards an empirically grounded form of theological reflection constitutes a pervasive feature of the narrative style that characterises large portions of the Scriptures. Through stories, imagination is trained on what Peterson calls '*earthiness*' (Peterson 1997: 2). In fact, it is in human stories—which could include the life stories young people told themselves and each other at Taizé—that God reveals himself (Stroup 1981: 145-47; Jodock 1981; Mead 2007: 135-37; Goldingay 2003: 28; Wright 1992: 45, 79).

In this perspective, accounting for life implies connecting the apparently meaningless reality of events, relationships, and experiences into a narrative of design and relatedness to God that is, itself, a form of practical theology. This involves making sense of concrete and often very human circumstances of living, in all their materiality—family and friend relationships, sexuality, feelings of failure and inadequacy, doubts and grief—and to situate them in light of God's wider presence and redemptive Story. It is through this form of relational participation and observation that we come to know God. In the Bible, as in young people's accounts, human stories never represent models of perfection or sanitised ideals; rather, they are often narrated with unsettling

realism to engage the audience in a spiritual exercise of attention, challenging it to recognise God's involvement with the full range of humanity's imperfection. The emphasis on this form of narrative practical theology closely evokes the reflexive impulse underlying young people's decision to participate in a Taizé pilgrimage. As seen in the previous chapters, rather than being inspired by a specific interest for the Community's theology and mission, interviewees' participation was generally motivated by a desire to spend time reflecting on the scattered pieces of their lives and to compose them in a narrative of design involving God's authorship.

This aspect of young people's appropriation of their Taizé pilgrimage experience finds close parallels in other studies on similar phenomena (Harris 1999; Harris 2010, 2013; Reader 2007; Egan 2010; Frey 1998). Reflecting on the implications of young people's involvement in this form of practical theology is therefore particularly significant for the life of the Church. Taylor articulates the impulse to narrate life as a story as a form of a hermeneutic ontology: human beings are self-interpreting creatures who acquire knowledge—of themselves, of others, of God himself—through embodied existence and experience. Building on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, he argues that individuals' self-interpretation is structured across time. We create narratives through which we remember and reconstruct our past and project our purposes into the future. Thus, we see our existence as a story that progressively unfolds and that we articulate as a narrative interpretation. This gives meaning to our life, as it creates distinctions between more or less significant experiences and projects our existence into the future as a living project, a quest (Abbey 2004: 3-5; Smith 2002: 97-113; Taylor 1989, 1992). Life becomes a narrative of *'maturations and regressions, overcomings and defeats'* (Taylor 1989: 50-51) through which individuals understand themselves as beings that grow and become, and for whom the future always represents a redemption of the past (Smith 2002: 98).

The ontological dynamic illustrated by Taylor contributes to explain some important aspects of young people's experience at Taizé. In the previous sections, I highlighted that participants' decision to join the pilgrimage was motivated by a desire to recover a sense of meaning and perspective on their lives, something they perceived as having been lost under the pressure of everyday living. What guided young people to leave their ordinary routines and spend time in a monastic community was the need to disentangle and weave together again the threads of their life stories—a hermeneutical exercise Taylor considers intimately connected to our being fully human (Smith 2002: 98-99). In the unique conditions of attentiveness and experimental freedom created by pilgrims' distancing from their ordinary contexts, this life-long reflexive work became

particularly intense. Ritual mobility and, more broadly, spiritual practices provided languages and structures to holistically pursue a quest for harmony, coherence, and wholeness youth performed by re-articulating their life narratives.

However, the distinctive element of the narrative work of interpretation taking place at Taizé consisted in the fact that it underlay a sapiential orientation, as it involved an individual and communal reflexive effort to read reality in light of its relatedness to God. Thus, if for Taylor narrative interpretation seeks to give life a sense of order and direction, in young people's experiences this activity intimately intertwined with an attempt to understand the past as divinely inhabited and project it into the future. Life was undoubtedly conceived as a narrative alternatively evolving through overcomings and failures (Taylor 1989: 50-51), but on their winding road towards wholeness young people called God to be their guide and companion. Participants' act of inviting God to be a co-interpreter of their life narratives is extremely important, as it highlights their agency as practical theologians, seekers, and interpreters of God's redemptive workings amidst ordinary living. In this context, narrative interpretation implied a specific form of openness, a reading of the world as a re-enchanted landscape whose meaning could not be exhausted by mere immanence. Articulating one's story thus constituted a specific practice of theological integration, in which the divine was discovered as present amidst the human, and the human was understood as part of a larger Story. As we have seen above, this process was dynamic and not devoid of pain, uncertainties, and ambiguities but always involved a relationship with the divine that was conceived as an ongoing interpretive dialogue and a recapitulation of life experiences. Its significance went beyond a mere speech act, as it often implied an actual change of perspective that reoriented participants' self-understanding and view of life. The act of re-narrating personal stories as related to God's activity had, therefore, a performative quality and an immediate this-worldly significance. Building on Gerkin (Gerkin 1984, 1986), Anderson and Foley similarly emphasise that this interpretive activity consists not only in a way of articulating our identity and explaining the world, but also in a way of *being* that becomes foundational to further explanations and interpretations: *'Our stories are not so much part of experience as they are the premise of experience'* (Anderson and Foley 2001: 11). Writing from a sociological viewpoint, Ammerman confirms this idea: *'Accounts are never merely accounts: they also shape reality'* (Ammerman 2014: 293). Thus, for participants re-articulating their life stories in light of their relatedness with God often resulted in freeing them from an inner captivity, opening new, clearer perspectives on

themselves and on others, shaping a new course of action, renewing and strengthening faith. In this sense, I would argue that for these young people telling their stories before God, at Taizé, was in fact a way through which he actively worked to redeem and transform their existence. However, this understanding of the nature of pilgrims' subjective activity raises some important questions concerning the function of Taizé's mediation in this reflexive process. The contemporary emphasis on individual seekers' autonomy has minimised the appreciation of the role of institutional providers such as the Community. In a context characterised by a perceived marginalisation of Christians in society, shrinking congregations, and ageing membership, young people's participation in communities of practice like Taizé is essential for the ongoing production and maintenance of what Ammerman defines as '*theistic spiritual discourses*' (Ammerman 2014: 301, 32). As highlighted by my empirical analysis, through organised ritual mobility and a purposeful restructuring of time and space the Community creates a focused environment that facilitates the practice of the spiritually oriented hermeneutics of life I have defined as sapiential theology. However, while in participants' perspective this structure worked as a reflexive vehicle for their narrative self-constructions, a profound divergence existed between Taizé's embedded theology and the trajectory of youth's self-expressive journeying. In the Community's spirituality, knowing God involved separating from the world in a pursuit that implied monastic withdrawal, contemplation, prayer, and a spiritualised reading of the Scriptures; subjects related to young people's concrete living were noticeably absent from its objective theological mediation. Young people's participation, on the contrary, utilised these reflexive vehicles to pursue a form of integrative, this-world oriented wisdom that involved reading the world in light of God's presence, as a vehicle of divine understanding. According to Fiddes, this divide is deeply rooted in the tradition of Western theology (Fiddes 2013: 6-9). Its foundations reside in a contrast between a vision of *sophia* as the knowledge of an ultimate reality situated beyond the world, influenced by Aristotle's philosophy, and the idea of wisdom embedded in the Hebrew sapiential tradition, which was grounded in observing and participating in the reality of the world and integrated practical judgement (*phronesis*) and knowledge of God (*sophia*) (Fiddes 2013: 6-9). This divergence is at the origin of the Community's deficit in engaging with the kind of embodied, this-world oriented sapiential theology young people would have needed to support their narrative interpretations. For Roebben this disconnection represents a key challenge for the Church today:

*Is there a horizon of meaningfulness that fills our search with sense and sensitivity? Are there images of successful lives that can inspire us? Or do we have to find out everything by ourselves? Travelling and being on the road seem to the current keywords for a vital and resilient attitude towards life, but do young people truly possess sufficient guarantees to be 'at home on the road'? (Roebben 2009: 20)*

The case of young people's participation at Taizé shows that the resources participants used to support their interpretive work were creatively found at the intersection between the individual and the communal, the religious and the secular (Ammerman 2014; Anderson and Foley 2001). They included an eclectic variety of collective elements: images and affective impressions from songs both religious and secular, fragments of conversations with a school chaplain, youth worker, friend, or colleague, ideas and experiences appropriated while attending their parishes, ideas drawn from popular psychology, books, and much more. Young people's narrative constructions were thus composite and multilayered, as they spanned across their life experiences as students, workers, friends, lovers, sons and daughters, and believers (Anderson and Foley 2001; Ammerman 2014). They integrated different stories and identities through a work that was influenced by a wide range of agents and institutions yet could not be considered deterministically, as it implied creative agency, innovation, and adaptation to specific circumstances and actors (Anderson and Foley 2001: 12; Ward 2008). Religious structures like Taizé participate in this interpretive work by circulating symbols, stories, rituals, languages, and ideas and by functioning as physical canopies, structured spaces orienting individuals' sapiential work (Ammerman 2014; Ward 2008; Anderson and Foley 2001). Beyond this general role as religious providers and containers of spiritual conversations, however, their pastoral task should be to accompany believers through their hermeneutical journey by clarifying the relatedness between their stories and God's Story, by challenging false images of fullness, and by providing a translation of the Gospel as an embodied form of living. It was particularly in this role that the Community showed its weaknesses. Taizé's utopian vision and the virtuoso spiritual model it embodied were either ignored or discarded by young people as inapplicable to their ordinary lives; the spiritualised reading of the Gospels conveyed by its catechesis was considered as irrelevant to their sapiential quest. As a result, the guide of participants' hermeneutical work was their inner self and the narrative wisdom they traded with other youth.

In conclusion, young people's experience of pilgrimage to the Community points out the extraordinary importance for the Church to provide religiously oriented spaces, communities where young people may pursue their reflexive work of self-interpretation in light of their faith. In this perspective, the strength of Taizé consists in its highly inclusive orientation towards an

experimental, subject-oriented spirituality for which truth is individually and communally discovered, rather than simply conveyed. Beyond these aspects, however, the analysis also pointed out some foundational weaknesses of Taizé's mediation. As argued above, the essential core of young people's practice was a narrative search for a form of wisdom able to fill the correlation gap between faith and human experience. It was precisely in this area that the Community's mediation failed to provide a translation of the Gospel that could help young people frame their reflexive attempts, rescue their stories from their inner, untold captivities and reconnect them to God's redemptive Story.

## **6.5 Communities of travellers**

In the previous section of this chapter, I have emphasised the subject-centred nature of young people's narrative constructions. At this stage, however, it is of crucial importance to highlight that pilgrims' self-expressive questing did not imply that their interpretive work took place in isolation. As pointed out in the previous chapters, the collective dimension played a significant role's in participants' experience. According to my empirical findings, the perspective of accessing others was among participants' strongest motivations to join the pilgrimage; furthermore, the possibility to share one's interpretive journey with other youth constituted one of the most valued aspects of pilgrims' experience. The Community provided not only a reflexive canopy, a space of spiritual openness and personal transformation but also opportunities for young people to enrich their quest for wisdom and wholeness with a communal and dialogical dimension.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, at a basic level this communal dimension operated to provide validation and plausibility to interviewees' spiritual and existential questing. This aspect both assimilates and differentiates their experience from that of participants in other pilgrimages (Harris 2010; Rymarz 2008; Norman and Johnson 2011). According to Harris, the powerful aesthetic and affective experience of participating in a large mass service in the Cathedral of our Lady impressed British young pilgrims with a powerful feeling of unity and with the sense of being part of a community that extended across time and space. While this sense of identification tended to marginalise specific doctrinal elements, such as Marian devotion, it validated youth's denominational identification and affirmed the plausibility of young people's journey as Catholic believers (Harris 2010). In his study of the Catholic World Youth Day,

Rymarz observes similar dynamics (Rymarz 2008). The feeling of emotional unity inspired by the immersion in a large youth crowd and the mobilisation of the rich repertoire of symbols, rituals, and languages of the Catholic tradition provided validation and plausibility for participants' denominational choice (Rymarz 2008; Norman and Johnson 2011; Hervieu-Léger 1999). The case of Taizé presents similarities with these examples in that, for most participants, the sensorial and affective experience of being part of a worship service involving thousands other youth inspired a feeling of emotional unity and the sense of being part of something '*greater*'—an invisible, universal community of spiritual pilgrims. Differently from the case of Lourdes and the Catholic World Youth Day, however, the pluralistic and non-directive framework of Taizé's mediation implied that this sense of validation and plausibility could only be invested in affirming the direction of each individual's questing trajectory, independently from its content.

However, these aspects were not the most important in young people's accounts. As evidenced by participants' high appreciation of Taizé's small groups, in fact, it was at a more personal and relational level that participants situated the primary significance of the communal dimension of their experience at Taizé. In this context the other was, above all, a dialogical partner, a resource to read life with a clearer eye and become a more self-aware, whole human being. From this viewpoint, the theme of the presence of the other at Taizé can be seen as closely related to the notion of human beings as self-interpreting creatures discussed in the previous section. This hermeneutical ontology has important consequences when applied to the relationship with the other. In fact, individuals' search for meaning requires a space of articulation that involves the presence of the other. Identity, articulation, and intersubjective dialogue are thus intrinsically connected. It is by externalising their self-interpretations and clarifying the framework that orients their lives that human beings situate themselves in relation to God and an idea of spiritual and existential fullness. At Taizé, small groups are often the context where young people reconstruct a map of their journey, locate their position, and glimpse—in dialogue with others—a deeper layer beyond the surface of reality. This element reconnects pilgrims' intersubjective work to the idea of interpretive communities and sapiential theology as practical wisdom. Peterson considers this kind of earthly conversation as an essential and much neglected spiritual practice (Peterson 1998: 19-21). The Christian tradition has often privileged preaching and teaching as main channels through which individuals could learn about the Gospel and the specific shape of life practiced by Christ's followers. To balance



this overemphasis, Peterson suggests considering conversation as a central spiritual practice, a '*quieter use of language*' that emerges from the everyday and inhabits '*times and places which are not set apart for religious discourse*' (Peterson 1998: 19-20). In Peterson's view, this form of '*spiritual counsel*' is essential in supporting believers in the business of finding the footprints of the Spirit in their daily journey. From a sociological viewpoint, Luckmann confirms this insight by emphasising that in the religious domain conversation is the most important vehicle of reality maintenance (Luckmann 1967: 152). Ammerman similarly speaks about the importance of 'spiritual tribes', flexible networks of practice that provide opportunities for spiritual conversations. In her view, it is in these dialogues that the sacred spills over the surface of the ordinary and illuminates it, allowing individuals to reframe their life narratives (Ammerman 2014: 110).

Young people's conversations in small groups at Taizé are an example of this practice of spiritual conversation. As noted by Taylor, the contemporary inward turn places the inner self as the new frontier of a possible re-enchantment of the world. This orientation emphasises the importance of communal spaces marked by the intimacy of personal, non-hierarchical exchanges (Taylor 2007: 539-40, 627-28). In this arena, religious options must not only be the expression of a personal choice but also need to be authentic and 'speak' to the individual and her story. This leads to a multiplication of intermediate, customised spiritual and moral options (Taylor 2007: 299-321). In this context, the only way to be a community is through forms of horizontal, non-hierarchical sharing marked by an ethos of mutual acceptance, similarly to what happens in young people's small groups at Taizé. In their conversations, young pilgrims recognised each other as travel companions on a path leading to a deeply personal destination; their journey of self-interpretation created a space of mutuality that allowed them to mould a common language and invited them to articulate their insights. As they shared their spiritual narratives, they actively engaged in an effort of self-understanding through which they looked for others' help as provisional partners (Egan 2010; Taylor 2007: 714). Sharing one's journey with others and looking with them for God's footprints in it had a performative function: in these conversations, in fact, the divine was often made manifest as present, active, and recognisable in one's life. Taylor compares this process to the dynamic at work in the Bible itself, in whose narratives the people of Israel reflected on their history and manifested God's presence through language (Taylor 2007: 756-57). In these stories, the divine enters the world in the past but also

projects its action in the present and future, in the realities of writers as well as readers.

Developing a similar line of thought, theologians De Lange and Roebben emphasise that:

*God places his transcendence in the hands of human persons who in the process of telling their life story thus inscribe themselves in the 'tradition' of such life stories. Human persons turn out to be the narrative of Godself. This concept of incarnation, which is part of the essence of Christianity (according to the Gospel of John, 'God established his tent among us in the form of the historical person of Jesus, the one who dwelt of old in the bosom of the Father') is given a unique radiance at a time in which becoming a person of faith requires an explicitly personal choice. Our dawning awareness of this embodied form of Christianity is a slow process. (De Lange and Roebben 2002: 55)*

As witnessed by the interviewees' remarks, at Taizé these conversations had a transformative power. Openly articulating their life journey as a path marked by God's action helped pilgrims to acquire a new focus and a clearer sense of direction and, with it, a renewed awareness of God's presence and love. Furthermore, in building and trading their narratives, young people broadened their vocabulary of God's incarnations in human life; as every story is different, listening to the other gave them an opportunity to learn new spiritual languages and sharpen their sensibility to different expressions of God's presence. In this sense, what young people did at Taizé was contrary to any attempt at reducing Christian life to a standardised, monocentric model. Their spiritual explorations could be seen as a manifestation of the vitality of Christian faith in the contemporary context, as in the effort of discerning God's epiphanies in their life they appropriated bits and pieces of Christianity's centuries-old tradition of theological languages, experiences, rituals, and symbols. In this effort of meaning making, these raw materials became incarnated in pilgrims' stories. The long chain of the Christian tradition was thus reconnected to the complexity of contemporary living, and this welding gave it new life and plausibility.

This form of community life offers important insights to the Church in a contemporary context; it also highlights some potential dangers. In the previous section, I showed how one of the major weaknesses in the functioning of Taizé's small groups lay in the disconnection between the ex-carnated version of the Christian narrative presented in the morning 'Bible introductions', and the earthly orientation of young pilgrims' sapiential interpretive practice. This issue is connected not only to Taizé's implicitly dualistic spirituality but also to its theological epistemology. Its emphasis on direct spiritual revelation, in fact, presupposes an immediacy of relationship with the sources of the Christian tradition that marginalises the role of mediators and interpreters as a way to avoid divisions and return to the spiritual unity of Christianity's early beginnings. This theological position leads the Community to minimise the importance of creating interpretive bridges between young people's ordinary realities and the repository of languages, stories,

symbols, and rituals it makes available as raw materials for their use. As a consequence, young people tended to see the Gospel as a matter of catechetical instruction, an archaeology of faith—interesting, but by and large unrelated to their lives. The task of interpreting life lay mostly on intersubjective exchanges, which allowed participants to explore their questions, trade stories and experiential insights, and help each other navigating the ‘stuff’ of life to discover God’s signposts on a somewhat uncertain road.

In the contemporary landscape, it becomes increasingly difficult for religious institutions to mediate a Christian narrative with which all individuals may identify (Luckmann 1990). The balance between religious structures and the subject has shifted to the advantage of the second, and individuals’ search for meaning plays a gatekeeping function in orienting their appropriation of the Christian tradition. This implies that homogenising and reductionist forms of religious mediation lose their significance to the advantage of expressions that may better reflect the pluralistic and holistic orientation of these personal quests (Taylor 2007). Young people’s sapiential conversations in Taizé’s small groups are an example of an alternative, horizontal<sup>111</sup> form of theological mediation. This reorientation is not necessarily a loss; rather, it should be seen as an opportunity for the Church to balance its mediated expression by taking into fuller consideration the fact that the God of the Bible is revealed in experiential and relational forms, in the concrete life journey of his human creatures. This step becomes even more necessary in a social and cultural context characterised by a crisis of religious transmission, where belief becomes less and less plausible and individuals find it increasingly difficult to discern a correlation between the Christian faith and the complexity of everyday life (De Lange and Roebben 2002; Roebben 2009). Horizontal expressions such as Taizé’s small communities have the potential of turning individuals into subjects actively committed in reconstructing a correlation between their faith and their life in the world.

It is, in fact, by providing communal, sapientially oriented spaces that the Church can fully engage in its essential role as a mediating agency and become a place of continuity and innovation, where believers remember, reinterpret, and reincarnate the rich polyphony of the

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<sup>111</sup> In his analysis of the contemporary secular age, Taylor argues that our society has shifted from a vertical to a horizontal worldview. In horizontal societies *‘each of us is equidistant from the centre’* and *‘immediate to the whole’* (Taylor 2007: 209). Horizontal societies are characterised by a shift from hierarchical and mediated forms of access to egalitarian and direct ones. Arguably, this move also has significant consequences on religious institutions and their mediated expressions; a structure like the sermon, for instance, will tend to lose significance to the advantage of horizontally and pluralistically oriented forms of mediation.

Christian salvation narrative, so that it may be woven into new words and shapes of life (Roebben 2009). De Lange and Roebben suggest a similar view:

*Churches ought to be spaces in which the broken pieces of human hope and favour are brought together in lived moments of reflection and celebration. Monolithic answers with their 'take it or leave it' character are no longer appropriate. People are in search of 'meaning providers' in order to learn how to reconstruct the broken shards of their life project in a meaningful way and in order to shed light on a story of possibilities which has its roots in the complexity of human experience and can restore perspective to their lives again. The Christian tradition seeks to anchor itself in the experience of grace and humanity. It seeks to be a source of healing in the fullest sense of the world: to 'bind up' humanity's broken desire for the good and full life and to establish relationships with the dream of humanity in precisely the same way as the narratives of the Jewish people and their prophets and the narratives of Jesus Christ ascribed this healing to God. (De Lange and Roebben 2002: 56)*

In a context in which the plausibility of transcendent frameworks of meaning is compressed under the competition of immanent worldviews, expressive, subject-centred voices of protests surface as individuals long for a centre of meaning for their life (Taylor 2002, 2007). This yearning opens the way to all sorts of spiritual explorations whose common characteristic are a focus on authenticity and a scope that holistically embraces the uniqueness and particularity of each story. In this scenario, truth can no longer be presented in ex-carnated and homogenising forms; rather, it needs to be incarnated in narratives that translate this search for wholeness in a rich diversity of embodied shapes of life.

In this perspective, the Church could constitute a unique space of reflexivity, a 'community of travellers', a diverse crossroad where individual trajectories of fullness meet, guided by their faith. Each community of believers could thus be imagined as fellowship of imperfect saints who, by sharing the narratives of their unfinished spiritual journeys, point out a tear in the homogeneous fabric of life and suggest the mysterious sense of a divine presence. The awareness that others perceive the same presence and walk in its company would confirm travellers on their path, connect former strangers, and turn them into a community. Differently from more theoretical and homogenising theological expressions, life narratives provide, in fact, a holistic language that is open to diversity and incorporates the complexity of God's multiple incarnations in humanness. Stories invite believers to embody the sacred in a multiplicity of earthly transitions—doubt, suffering, loneliness, questioning, but also closeness, clarity, joy, reassurance, consolation—through which life in Christ slowly takes shape as the imperfect path of everyday 'saints'. The diversity of these journeys contributes to enrich the web of available routes on the road map of other believers as well as their understanding of the itinerary still to be covered.

In this framework, a fundamental role could be played by a recovery of the relevance of Bible stories to individuals' journeying. British theologian John Milbank argues for a substantial subversion in the Church's approach to the Christian tradition and particularly to the Bible—a shift from the abstract language by which narratives and symbols are so often obscured and a return to the centrality of an embodied language of faith that may bring those stories and images back to the centre of believers' life. Biblical narratives and symbols are, in fact, the raw material of Christian theology and the source of its continuous vitality (Milbank 2005: 1-5). According to French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (Streib 1998: 316), the narrative shape of the salvation story contains a strong theological element that invites participation, embodiment, mirroring, and creativity and constitutes the opposite of a congealed theory. In this perspective, narratives constitute 'laboratories for thought' (Streib 1998: 320) where people are invited to imaginatively explore ideas of holiness and fall, wholeness and brokenness. Drawing from Ricoeur, Streib emphasises that it is through a continual re-figuration of our stories in dialogue with the narratives that surround us that we build our personal narrative as a '*cloth woven of stories told*' (De Lange and Roebben 2002: 58; Streib 1998: 322). Following Ricoeur's line of thought, I would argue that the interaction between the stories of contemporary believers and the narratives consecrated by the Christian tradition could be seen as a form of spiritual *detour* (Ricoeur and Thompson 1981; Streib 1998), a practice of detachment that opens a space of spiritual imagination and allows believers to transcend their self-centredness. In this framework, the Church could be imagined as a place where the memory of God's presence in the salvation stories of its centuries-old chain of 'saints' is remembered, interpreted, and made part of people's imaginative efforts at building meaning and finding a spiritual centre for their lives. While Taizé's ephemeral groups lend themselves to the danger of an instrumental use of the other, the Church could more coherently represent an ideal of spiritual companionship in which Christian life narratives take shape in an authentic, committed and sustained dialogue with the sources of Christianity and with the other. Differently from the artificial generational homogeneity of the Taizé Community, these spiritual conversations could bring into contact the life trajectories of the elderly, the adult, and the young and weave them together, thus enriching believers' lexicon of God's expressions in human life. Immersed in the reality of the world, the Church could thus represent a space where the everyday business of life is not kept at bay but constitutes the very fabric of a common, interpretive spiritual practice.



## Chapter 7 - Conclusion

### 7.1 Summary

This research aimed to demonstrate a basic hypothesis, which was formulated in its introduction. It postulated that *'youth pilgrimage as articulated by the Taizé Community is an arena of interaction between different and sometimes substantially divergent interpretations'*. Furthermore, it claimed that *'a majority of young pilgrims inhabit and appropriate their pilgrimage to Taizé as a vessel for spiritual and personal explorations whose core expresses a holistic, experiential, and subjective orientation'*. Consequently, it suggested the existence of a significant divergence between the implicitly dualistic, ascetic spirituality historically developed by the Community and expressed in its mediation, and the orientation underlying young people's appropriation.

In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, I proposed to utilise the practical theological methodology formulated by Swinton and Mowat (Swinton and Mowat 2006), whose reflective cycle involves the use of social research methods within a theological framework. According to this model, the first phase of a researcher's engagement with a phenomenon involves exploring its nature and the issues related to it (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94). Therefore, the initial step of this study (Chapter One) consisted in surveying primary and secondary literary sources related to the Taizé Community. This allowed me to reconstruct its historical development and the dynamics underlying the progressive emergence of its ministry to young people. More specifically, the literature survey provided key insights concerning Brother Roger's central role in the shaping of the Community's structural organisation, theology, and mediated expressions throughout the decades. Additionally, and most importantly, the survey clarified the relationship between Taizé's core ecumenical commitment and its mission towards youth. Lastly, it contributed to situate the thesis within the context of contemporary research on the Community. This allowed me to engage with studies focusing on Taizé's youth pilgrimages from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, which complexified my understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

Given the objective of the thesis, which aimed to highlight the divergence between the theology objectively mediated by Taizé and young pilgrims' subjective interpretations, in Chapter Three I extended my engagement with the first phase of Swinton and Mowat's methodology by focusing on a reconstruction of the theological framework within which the Community's ministry to

young people needed to be situated. The chapter further substantiated key insights emerging from the literature review, according to which Taizé's specific commitment to serve young people had to be understood as an instrument of its broader ecumenical mission. The analysis of Brother Roger's theology showed that its main pillar is a core soteriological theme whose axis is Christ's prayer reported in John 17.21: Christ came on earth to overcome our inner and inter-human divisions and restore God's communion with human beings. This core idea has fundamental ecclesiological implications, as it constitutes and validates the identity of the true Church, which can only be recognised as such so long as it actively participates in God's providential plan of communion with all humankind. Furthermore, this theme involves a strong ecumenical and missional emphasis. Christian unity is, in fact, an indispensable prerequisite of missionary credibility towards the world; only when reconciled will the Church become a convincing, faithful agent of Christ's desire of unity with all human beings. The condition to become true Christ bearers is an individual conversion leading human beings from division (from God, within themselves, and with others) to unity. By becoming closer to Christ we are transformed and become part of a 'common creation', the weaving of the robe of Christ, his Church. Spirituality is the vehicle of this transformation and is defined as a form of asceticism – a disciplined, contemplative pursuit of a growing conformity to Christ that takes place through an intimate communion with him. This theological narrative constitutes the foundational framework of the Community's ministry to young people. In its essence, Taizé's mission to youth aims at awakening them to Christ's presence and to his desire for communion with all humankind. By participating in the Community's prophetic parable of unity, in an environment promoting spiritual re-centring and intensive contemplative practice, young people are invited to become agents of a 'joint undertaking' whose objective is the reconciling of all human beings to God and to each other.

In the context of my thesis, the reconstruction of this theological narrative provided the background against which I started building my analysis of the possible divergences between Taizé's intended theology and young people's interpretations. To generate empirical data able to elucidate the problem, I participated in two youth pilgrimages promoted by Church of England institutions. This phase of my research corresponded to the second move of Swinton and Mowat's methodology (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 94-96). This involves an interdisciplinary interaction with fields of knowledge that may help in investigating the dynamics at play in a given context. As illustrated in Chapter Two, the social research methodology applied in my



exploration of the hypothesis was qualitative, within an overall case study approach that involved the use of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The case study aimed at reconstructing the complex set of interactions underlying young people's participation in these pilgrimages and the meanings they assigned to their experience at Taizé. The results of this empirical study were presented in Chapter Four. At a primary level they highlighted that youth pilgrimages to the Taizé Community are not a spontaneous phenomenon; rather, they are appropriated and promoted by Church of England institutions as a ministry resource to support youth retention at local level. Leaders utilise them mainly as an opportunity for young people to meet other Anglican and Christian youth in an international context, to attenuate their sense of social and cultural marginality as believers, and to strengthen their commitment by providing spiritual re-centring and a sense of plausibility for their faith choice. This focus implies that leaders' promotional and organisational practices tend to ex-corporate the meaning of these pilgrimages from their embedded ecumenical horizon. As a consequence, participants generally showed little awareness of Taizé's specific vision and purpose. Leaders' appropriation strategy, therefore, constituted the primary framework of participants' interpretation of their experience at Taizé. As shown by my empirical analysis, for these youth the boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism, sacred and profane, spirituality and leisure were often blurred. Such an interpretation directly challenged the Community's efforts to avoid this blurring. On the part of Taizé, in fact, the organisation of these pilgrimages involves an intentional enforcement of strategies aimed at marking a clear, anti-structural and implicitly dualistic distance between the Community and the outside world, the extra-ordinary and the ordinary, the sacred and the profane. The staging of this parable of community thus involves a physical and symbolic distancing from the world. This allows Taizé to create a liminal space where ordinary complexity is simplified and life is restructured around a single spiritual centre. This alternative hierarchy of values is embodied in the Community's spatial and temporal organisation; other strategies put in place to create this ideal representation are a symbolic levelling of differences through synchronisation (same schedule) and homogenisation (same accommodation, same food, same involvement in practical work, etc.). These devices are not only the instruments of Taizé's utopian representation but also constitute a reflexive canopy designed to orient and support pilgrims' inner pilgrimage. The essential vehicle of this journey is a subject-centred spirituality that emphasises the role of direct revelation, intuition, perception, and experience. Its objective

is to lead youth to embrace a contemplative communion with God and an ascetic commitment to participate in the realisation of the Community's ecumenical vision.

In contrast with this picture, my empirical exploration revealed that pilgrims assigned Taizé's mediation a significantly divergent set of meanings. This gap was initially highlighted by my findings concerning young people's motivations to join the pilgrimage, which were primarily connected not to a specific awareness or interest for the Community's ecumenical vision but to a subject-focused need to temporarily suspend the alienating pressure of everyday life. Joining a pilgrimage was generally conceived as a way of distancing from the ordinary to inhabit a neutral territory, a space of spiritual and existential re-centring, a liminal place from where life, in all its materiality, could be creatively re-appropriated and re-narrated from a perspective that integrated faith as a key hermeneutical resource. Young people's participation was often connected to a personal crisis, a loss, a search for emotional healing, or simply a desire to restore an inner balance. In their perspective, self-expressive searching and God's quest were generally inseparable, as part of the same search for meaning. The findings concerning participants' interpretation of the Community's mission revealed a similar understanding. Taizé was understood as a place designed for individuals to get in contact with a deeper reality—be that the inner self, God or, more frequently, both—and find new energies to face everyday life. In this view, the Community's effectiveness consisted in providing a liminal, focused space where distractions were minimised and free self-expression encouraged. This allowed participants to intensely focus on pursuing their subject-centred spiritual and existential explorations, individually or with the help of others. While deeply personal, these quests were, in fact, rarely conceived as merely individual; in young people's perspective, one of Taizé's strongest elements of attractiveness consisted in making available a rich repertoire of intersubjective resources to support individuals' journeying. This understanding represented a clear departure from the Community's embedded theology and highlighted how its youth pilgrimages should, indeed, be considered as an arena of substantially diverging interpretations. These findings confirmed my initial thesis and its claim concerning the divergence between the implicitly dualistic, ascetic spirituality mediated by Taizé and the holistic, subject-focused orientation expressed by young people's interpretations. This conclusion found further support in the analysis of participants' appropriation of the Community's Bible introductions, in the consideration of the central role of intersubjective exchanges in the small groups, and in pilgrims' interpretations of their participation in communal worship. In summary, the study

showed that rather than inscribing their pilgrimage within the Community's ecumenical narrative, young people inhabited the spiritual canopy provided by Taizé as a warehouse of resources to be subjectively selected, validated, and appropriated based on their significance for their self-expressive trajectories.

Consistent with Swinton and Mowat's methodology, in Chapter Five I further deepened my investigation of these findings by making use of a supplementary interdisciplinary lens, pilgrimage studies. In the first part of the chapter, a literature review of the field allowed me to engage with contemporary research on similar phenomena. This critical analysis highlighted important parallels between the dynamics at play at Taizé and those emerging from the study of other pilgrimage sites. As a result, I was able to complexify my understanding of the case study findings. At a theoretical level, the literature review pointed out the significance of the intersection between objective and subjective interpretations of a pilgrimage phenomenon. Consistent with the results of my empirical research, an institution's objective mediation cannot deterministically produce homogeneous subjective meanings. Without losing sight of the fact that, as suggested by Coleman (Coleman and Elsner 1995; Coleman and Eade 2004), institutions do not simply constitute empty vessels but contribute to shape pilgrims' experiences, from a subjective viewpoint it is of crucial importance to take into account the negotiated and complex nature of these interactions. Therefore, in the subsequent analysis of my findings I focused, on the one hand, on the specific characteristics of Taizé's objective mediation and, on the other hand, on the ways these were at the same time inhabited and subverted in young people's subjective appropriation. From an institutional viewpoint, the study emphasised the significance of reconstructing the actual theological text embedded in the Community's practice. In fact, the specific articulation by which Taizé mediates its theology tends to accentuate the dualistic aspects already present in Brother Roger's thought. Framing the restorationist motif of the Community's parable of reconciliation within pilgrimage's theme of flight from the world mediates a contrast between wilderness' ascetic purity and the spiritual and moral confusion of ordinary, urban living. In Taizé's symbolic language, withdrawal, nomadic precariousness, and simplicity are designed to authenticate a dualistic, anti-structural representation of holiness. In this perspective, encountering God implies leaving ordinary life to become an exile, a stranger inhabiting an extra-ordinary place outside the human realm. Divine epiphanies require virtuoso ascetic commitment, radical renunciation, and reliance on God.

At a functional level, this representation relies on strategies that have been identified as characteristic of numerous pilgrimage phenomena. As highlighted by Turner (Turner, 1969, 1974b; Turner and Turner 1978), distancing opens the possibility of creating a liminal, anti-structural space where ordinary hierarchies and values can be replaced by an alternative order. This mechanism allows the Community to stage its restorationist, prophetic utopia; by temporarily concealing differences, homogeneity and synchronicity are designed to produce a sense of *communitas* and unity that encourages horizontal, spontaneous relationships. At a subjective level, however, my empirical analysis revealed that while young people considered Taizé's staging structure as an extraordinarily effective vehicle of spiritual and existential mobility, they rejected the implicitly dualistic, ascetic theological narrative it was intended to convey. Rather than as a space 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1969: 97), participants inhabited the Community's liminal canopy as an 'intrastice' (Korol-Evans 2009: 8) allowing them to intensely focus on their ongoing self-expressive quests. This result was consistent with the findings of numerous contemporary studies on pilgrimage. These point out not only the individual character of participants' interpretations but also their mutual diversity and connection with each pilgrim's self-expressive trajectory (Collins-Kreiner 2010). From this subjective perspective, the ecumenical meaning of Taizé's *communitas* also shifted. The spontaneity of young people's relationships was not invested to validate the Community's utopian vision but was utilised as a resource to support their subject-centred questing.

Rather than being oriented by the Community's ascetic vision, youth's interpretive efforts were, therefore, focused on the concrete reality of their existence, to which they tried to give shape and order as a narrative guided by a meaning and a purpose. The nature of these hermeneutical attempts was inherently incarnational; in pilgrims' self-narratives the immanent was always represented as porous to the transcendent. Pilgrimage and spiritual practice were appropriated as extraordinarily flexible and effective structures through which pilgrims could embody their holistic journey towards growth and integration (McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005; Ammerman 2007, 2014). The Community worked as a rich warehouse of resources that were selectively ex-corporated based on their significance for pilgrims' self-expressive trajectory. In this context, young people could practice and learn languages, symbols, rituals, and practices that could help them throughout their ongoing hermeneutical journey; furthermore, the possibility to access other young people provided intersubjective support that validated and gave plausibility to their constructions of meaning.

The picture reconstructed in Chapters Four and Five provided strong empirical support for my research hypothesis. However, Swinton and Mowat suggest that the objective of Practical Theology is not only to acquire new understandings about a given situation, but to reflect theologically on them with a view to promoting faithful participation in God's redemptive actions (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 6). Therefore, in the final chapter (Chapter Six) I proceeded to discuss the theological and practical implications of my findings, a step that corresponds to the two final phases of Swinton and Mowat's methodology (Swinton and Mowat 2006: 96-97). The first part of my reflection focused on the main finding of this research—the confirmed divergence between the theology objectively mediated by the Community and participants' interpretations. This discrepancy highlighted the necessity for Church institutions to situate their appropriation of contemporary pilgrimage practice within a clearer theological framework. In fact, the Community's mediation involves a series of dangers. These are connected to its implicit tendency to convey a form of disembodied, Docetist theology, together with an elitist and potentially reductionist view of spirituality. My critical engagement with the Christian theological debate concerning pilgrimage revealed that these issues are not new. In essence, they point out the need for this practice to be framed within an overall theological narrative emphasising God's active presence in the ordinariness of the world, at every turn of a pilgrims' journey and not just in a few extra-ordinary places and times. This integrative, non-dualistic appropriation was also consistent with young people's interpretation of their experience at Taizé. Participants' underlying conviction was, in fact, that the ordinary reality of the world could be read as a place of God's epiphanies. Their participation in the pilgrimage was thus conceived as part of a lifelong quest for personal meaning and growth, along which spirituality could be used as an interpretive resource to reveal the porousness of the immanent to the transcendent. This self-expressive, holistic orientation reflected some essential traits of Taylor's post-Durkheimian religiosity (Taylor 2007).

Within this overarching theological framework, the chapter emphasised the significance of some additional findings emerging from the research. The first concerned the importance of embodied spiritual practice as vehicle of young people's interpretive journeys. The power of the experiential spirituality promoted by the Community consisted in its flexibility. This allowed pilgrims to inhabit its practical expressions as embodied instruments of their subjective quests. Practice worked as an integrative structure, a hermeneutical space where individuals' attempts at reordering and re-narrating their lives could be framed within a spiritual perspective. Thus,

rather than using spiritual practice as a vehicle towards ascetic commitment to the Community's ecumenical vision, participants invested it with a more holistic theological significance, as an incarnational expression of God's desire to be present in the messy, 'uncut' reality of their life. Practices became a spiritual canopy within which young people could pursue their quest for fullness and invite God to be a wrestling partner, a healer along a journey of redemption and growth. This orientation directly challenged the Community's mythic performance (Crossan 1975) and constituted an invitation for Taizé to take into serious consideration the real substance of young people's spiritual and existential pursuits.

The specific form of discernment at the centre of young people's interpretive practices represented a further finding discussed in the chapter and an additional pointer in the incarnational, parabolic direction illustrated above (Crossan 1975). Pilgrims' interpretive impulse was predominantly expressed in a self-narrative form that presented close similarities with Taylor's idea of hermeneutic ontology (Abbey 2004: 3-5; Taylor 1989, 1992). Its distinctive element was an underlying *sapiential* orientation. In their spiritual practice, pilgrims tried to understand and appropriate their everyday experiences in light of their relatedness to God, the self, and others. The form of embodied, experiential knowledge at the centre of these pursuits presented elements of affinity with the idea of wisdom underlying the sapiential tradition in the Bible and, more generally, the narrative style of large portions of the Scriptures. As in the biblical tradition, it was, in fact, in young people's life stories that God was relationally encountered and known. However, the significance of these narrative practices went beyond mere meaning making; re-narrating the self, discovering one's journey as a God-trodden path was also a performative act that constituted the premise of a new and transformative self-awareness. In Ammerman's words, '*Accounts are never merely accounts: they also shape reality*' (Ammerman 2014: 293). For participants re-articulating their life stories in light of God's presence and companionship often implied freeing them from an untold captivity and opening them to hope and renewal. In this context, Taizé's strength consisted in providing young people with a rich repertoire of resources they could subjectively appropriate to support their interpretive work; its greatest deficit consisted in its inability to mediate a theological narrative that could intersect participants' attempts at filling the correlation gap between their Christian faith and the reality of their lives.

The significance of young people's pursuit of an embodied form of wisdom was further highlighted during my engagement with a last finding of my research, which concerned the

value of intersubjectivity in young people's self-expressive journeys. Far from being individual pursuits, their interpretive efforts included a communal and dialogic dimension within which the other was perceived as a hospitable partner and a hermeneutical resource. Participants' self-narratives required a space of articulation; by externalising their self-interpretations young people could reconstruct a map of their journey, identify God's footsteps in it, and explore its plausibility with other interlocutors involved in the same endeavour. In this sense, Taizé's small groups worked as sapiential communities or, in Ammerman's terms, as temporary and fluid '*spiritual tribes*' (Ammerman 2014). Spiritual conversations became vehicles of '*reality maintenance*' (Luckmann 1967: 152), a form of hermeneutical practice through which young people bridged the realms of immanence and transcendence and filled the correlation gap between faith and living (Peterson 1998: 19-20; Ammerman 2014: 110). By building together and sharing their life stories, pilgrims broadened their vocabulary of God's incarnations in human life; they appropriated new spiritual languages and sharpened their ability to read and experience different expressions of God's presence in human existence. This finding emphasised the contemporary significance of horizontal, experientially oriented forms of religious communication; furthermore, it highlighted their power in generating a new spiritual awareness and a transformative perception of individuals' lives. From a ministry perspective, young people's experience with Taizé's small groups revealed the dangers involved in an institutions' inability to accompany these interpretive efforts by mediating a Gospel narrative that may faithfully incarnate God's desire to engage with all dimensions of human living. From a more positive viewpoint, however, this result also highlighted the effectiveness of the communal, intersubjective dimension of these interpretive processes in intersecting the plural and holistic nature of contemporary spiritual quests. More than through traditional, homogenising forms of religious communication, it is through these horizontal, sapientially oriented conversations that the Church can give expression to the fact that the God of the Bible reveals himself in experiential and relational forms.

## 7.2 Future research

In conclusion, the research confirmed the significance of studies exploring the interplay between objective and subjective perspectives in the appropriation of an institution's theological

mediation. Beyond the limited scope of this thesis, the picture reconstructed above pointed out rich possibilities for further research.

The first of these suggestions emerges from a consideration of the specific characteristics and limited size of the sample under study. As highlighted in the chapters introducing the research methodology (chapter two) and the empirical findings (chapter four), my investigation focused on two groups of British young people. Their religious background was predominantly Anglican, although connected to different and at times significantly divergent expressions of this tradition. Furthermore, with few exceptions, the sample's demographic reflected a very limited cross-section of the British population: it was predominantly Caucasian, middle class, and college-educated. Considering these elements, it would be important to replicate the study to challenge, confirm, or complexify its findings in light of a range of important variables. These could include religious affiliation and level of commitment, nationality, age, gender, and repeated participation in a Taizé pilgrimage.

Demographic variables related to the ethnic, economic, and educational characteristics of Taizé's population, in particular, should be the object of specific attention. Preliminary insights emerging from my research, in fact, suggests that the relatively homogeneous profile of my sample may, in fact, represent the typical profile of Taizé's audience and the Community's underlying difficulty to reach a more diverse population. This issue could be connected to a range of factors, from recruitment strategies to the actual demographic balance of the Churches that constitute the Community's basic promotional network.

As evidenced in chapter four, an important finding emerging from this thesis highlighted the weak theological and pastoral framing characterising the appropriation of these pilgrimages as a youth retention resource. The weakness of the theological and practical framework underlying youth leaders' adoption of these activities should be further tested against other samples. Furthermore, given the contextual nature of youth leaders' appropriation strategies, it would also be important to investigate the ways in which young people's participation in these programmes directly or indirectly interacts with the life of their local congregations.

Throughout the second part of the thesis (chapter four to six), the subjective significance of ritual mobility and liminality for individuals' spiritual and existential re-centring emerged as one of the thesis' most significant results. In this sense, the research's findings confirmed the insights emerging from numerous ethnographic studies highlighting the salience of pilgrimage as embodied practice. However, while pilgrimage research literature on this subject is extremely



rich and conceptually developed, empirically based theological studies on these practices are still relatively rare. This would suggest the interest of dedicating further study to this fascinating area.

Lastly, the research's findings are of particular interest for those interested in the study of the ecclesiological implications of what has been defined as the contemporary spiritual 'turn'. Against the tendency to emphasise the individual and autonomous character of contemporary spirituality, in fact, the thesis highlighted the role of alternative religious providers such as Taizé in creating fluid communities of practice and '*spiritual tribes*' to sustain believers' ordinary interpretive processes (Ammerman 2014). The interplay between these customised networks and denominational belonging constitutes an important area of research development.

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## **Appendix A. Interview outline**

### **Part A: introduction**

1. Could you please say your name, age, and nationality?
2. Could you give me some background about yourself? Do you currently study, or work?

### **Part B: Religious profile**

3. Do you consider yourself as a believer?  
(Possible follow-up question: how would you explain your relationship with God?)
4. What would you say has most influenced your views on this subject?  
(Possible follow-up questions: practices and commitment, how religion is understood and applied in everyday life)
5. Does a relationship with a church make part of what you have just told me?  
(Possible follow-up questions: do you currently attend a church? Can you tell me more about your involvement in it? Do you ever take part in activities oriented to young people, either at church or at the university?)
6. Have you ever attended any Taizé liturgies back home?
7. How did you first hear about Taizé?

### **Part C: Taizé**

8. Is this your first time at Taizé?  
Follow up question in case of first visit to the Community: if you had to explain why you are here, what would you say?  
Follow up questions in case of previous visits to the Community: have you experienced a change in the reasons leading you visit to Taizé, since the first time? What is your reason for being here, this time?
9. Have you ever visited Taizé by yourself, apart from an organised group?  
If not, do you always come with the same group?  
Follow up questions: have you ever considered coming alone?
10. Do you have any expectation or need you hope Taizé will meet?
11. How would you explain what Taizé is about?
12. Would you describe your typical day at Taizé?
13. If you had to explain to someone what you personally live here at Taizé, during this week, what would you say?
14. If you had to think about some aspects of Taizé that you particularly value, which ones would you choose? Why? Which ones would you consider less valuable? Why?

### **Part D: Taizé after Taizé**

15. Thinking about your return home, what do you think you will take with you from your experience at Taizé? How much do you think you can 'import' from Taizé into your ordinary life?
16. Taizé makes available a wide range of objects you can bring home (CDs, jewellery, candles, icons, pottery, books...). Are you planning to buy any of them? How do you think you will use them at home?

17. Do you keep contacts with friends you have met at Taizé? How?  
(Facebook, blogs, publishing videos or music on youtube, etc.)
18. Do you visit the Community's website, or receive its newsletter? Do you plan to do it, once back home?

## Appendix B. Research Ethics Committee Approval

Manuela Casti

Department of Education & Professional Studies

19<sup>th</sup> May 2009



Dear Manuela,

### **REP(EM)/08/09-76 – The Taize Community: A Case Study**

I am pleased to inform you that the above application has been reviewed by the E&M Research Ethics Panel that FULL APPROVAL is now granted.

Please ensure that you follow all relevant guidance as laid out in the King's College London *Guidelines on Good Practice in Academic Research*

([http://www.kcl.ac.uk/college/policyzone/attachments/good\\_practice\\_May\\_08\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/college/policyzone/attachments/good_practice_May_08_FINAL.pdf)).

For your information ethical approval is granted until the 18th May 2011. If you need approval beyond this point you will need to apply for an extension to approval at least two weeks prior to this explaining why the extension is needed, (please note however that a full re-application will not be necessary unless the protocol has changed). You should also note that if your approval is for one year, you will not be sent a reminder when it is due to lapse.

If you do not start the project within three months of this letter please contact the Research Ethics Office. Should you need to modify the project or request an extension to approval you will need approval for this and should follow the guidance relating to modifying approved applications: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics/applicants/modifications.html>

Any unforeseen ethical problems arising during the course of the project should be reported to the approving committee/panel. In the event of an untoward event or an adverse reaction a full report must be made to the Chairman of the approving committee/review panel within one week of the incident.

Please would you also note that we may, for the purposes of audit, contact you from time to time to ascertain the status of your research.

If you have any query about any aspect of this ethical approval, please contact your panel/committee administrator in the first instance

(<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/ethics/contacts.html>). We wish you every success with this work.

With best wishes

Yours Sincerely

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Daniel Butcher

Research Ethics Administrator



## Appendix C. Informed consent form

### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS (Face-to-face interviews)

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

**Title of Study:** The Taizé Community: A Case Study

**King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref:** REP(EM)/08/09-76

1. Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organizing the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part.
2. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will receive a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.
3. The information you have submitted will be published as part of a study. Please note that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify you from any publications.
4. Your data will be stored separately from the details concerning your identity or the key to the coding of the data.
5. *I understand that if I decide at any other time during the research that I no longer wish to participate in this project, I can notify the researcher and be withdrawn from it immediately without giving any reason. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up until the point stated on the Information Sheet (1 June 2010).*
6. *I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be treated in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 1998.*
7. *I agree to the tape recording of my interview (for face-to-face interviews only).*
8. *I am aware that all research materials and data will be securely stored as hard and electronic copies at King's College London for seven years.*

#### Participant's Statement:

I \_\_\_\_\_

agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Information Sheet about the project, and understand what the research study involves.

#### Researcher's Statement:

I \_\_\_\_\_

Confirm that I have carefully explained the nature, demands and foreseeable risks (where applicable) of the proposed research to the volunteer.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

1 copy for the participant – 1 copy for the researcher

## **Appendix D. Summary of field notes, participant observation**

### **Pilgrimage to Taizé, Summer 2009 (excerpts)**

#### *Day 1*

I meet my first pilgrimage group at Victoria Bus Station, in London. About thirty people wait for the bus to Taizé – parents, young pilgrims, leaders and adult participants. The youth group is made of six females and five males. Their approximate age is between twenty and twenty-five. They seem to know each other, although they greet their friends as if they had not met for a long time. There is no common way of dressing, but they generally look very 'tourist-like': the group is virtually undistinguishable from any other waiting here at the station. One of the young men wears pink hair, is tall, thin and very talkative. Leaders behave in a very informal, youthful, and relaxed way; they look and act more like older travel mates than like 'those in charge'. A few female participants wear Taizé crosses. This is the only sign distinguishing them from other tourists here at the station, and may imply that they may have visited the Community before. The group is predominantly Caucasian; only two girls are of different ethnicity (Pakistani). Other Taizé pilgrimage groups are preparing to board the bus with us and their ethnic make up is even less diverse. The space around the bay is all taken by an array of pieces of camping equipment: tents, backpacks, torches, mats, etc.

The adult members of the group are clergy in charge of the organization (a woman and a man in their late forties). Two elderly women (friends of the female leader) have also decided to join the pilgrimage.

As soon as we are on the bus, the female leader officially introduces me to the group. Participants seem to be already aware of who I am (they have been consulted via email prior to the pilgrimage). They react in a friendly way, many wave or smile at me as the leader speaks. Some of them are visiting Taizé for the first time.

After our departure, I start talking with some young pilgrims. As I discover, participants are mostly recruited through parish advertising; all of them attends a church at least once a week. They all come from different areas, so they do not belong to the same congregation; they rarely see each other outside this yearly Taizé pilgrimage. Some have repeatedly participated in these trips, and this 'reunion' has become a yearly tradition. The group is very lively and those who already know each other from previous trips seem anxious to reconnect. First-timers tend to stay by themselves and observe the others, read or listen to music. Overall, the trip is rather

uneventful. Adult leaders and participants keep by themselves and do not mix with young people. The female leader is concretely applying the principle she has explained to me before leaving: she wants to leave complete freedom and autonomy to the group. Even during the crossing of the Channel, on the ferry, adult participants keep separate from the youth group. This does not seem customary among other groups that travel with us. The group does not share any moment of prayer or spiritual preparation – the journey to the Community looks fairly similar to that of any youth group heading to a continental destination for leisure purposes. From my exchanges with young people I understand that once at Taizé the group will split; part of it will camp, while others will stay in barracks. According to some participants, however, camping is the only 'genuine' way to live the Taizé experience.

## *Day 2*

We arrive to destination at about 8:45 am. Young volunteers welcome pilgrim groups as they disembark their buses. The parking is full of buses coming from many different countries. Volunteers tell us what already seems clear: Sunday is a 'messy' day, at Taizé.

I ask the leader if she is planning to have a parallel programme with young people, during their free time. She replies that she prefers to entrust her group to the Brothers and let participants follow the Community's schedule of activities. In the meantime, she and the other adult participants will attend the programme the Community organises for adult pilgrims. She expects me to do the same and not to interfere with young people's activities. I will be able to spend time with them only during prayer services and free time. This limitation will clearly make participant observation rather challenging.

Apart from following different schedules and programmes, at Taizé adults and young people are also logistically separated. Adults are asked to follow their activities and consume their meals in a designated area at the northern edge of the Community, while youth occupy the central and southern parts of it.

I negotiate with the leader, and eventually we agree that I may eat all my meals with the youth group. She will do the same only once a day, to keep contact with them and ensure that everything is going well. She will also meet them every evening at the Oyak (the recreational space at the southern edge of the Community, where people gather after the last prayer service of the day).

In the meantime, volunteers invite us to participate in the Sunday morning mass.

The church is full to its capacity, white-dressed Brothers occupy the nave; young people sit all around its perimeter.

[...]

Attendees' attitude is informal, many are barefoot. Not all participate in the Eucharist, and after the end of the service many remain in the church to keep singing. Some young people rest on the floor, their eyes closed. Others simply sit and listen. Some of the Brothers still sit in the nave, but one by one get up from their prayer stool or chair and slowly walk away. Some young people take pictures of the church (even if it is forbidden by signs!).

[...]

During the rest of the day I realise that life is structured around a precise schedule, at Taizé. The Community's souvenir shop, the small convenience store next to the Oyak and the Oyak itself are closed during prayer services and scheduled activities. Activities are synchronized to minimize distractions, unify participants' focus, and to keep them – as much as possible – in sync. Does it work?

The youth group is settling in. Some pitch their tents, others prefer barrack accommodation – I share this last option with some girls of my group. Barracks are extremely simple: most of the space is taken by bunk beds with mattresses on top of which youth put their sleeping bags. Community toilets and showers are in a separate block nearby. The campus is very clearly structured, and its organization seems to reflect a specific hierarchy of values. Adults are at the upper margin, far from the main campus. They live in a parallel space, separated from youth. The Community is cut by half by a road that divides the camping area from the very heart of the activities: the Church of Reconciliation, situated at the very centre of Taizé, and the common areas where youth have their activities. The southern edge of the Community, outside the main perimeter, is occupied by the Oyak (the recreational area).

I finally join the rest of the group, in the cafeteria area. Young people agree to spend their meals together, every day. Some have not pitched their tent yet. Some complain, as they are very tired and the temperature is hot. I ask two female participants if this is their first time at Taizé: it is actually the third. Their father is a vicar of Pakistani origin, and it is through him that they have come to know Taizé. One of the participants, a young man sporting pink hair and a heavy metal-themed t-shirt, tells me that this is his second trip. His parish is paying for his travel expenses; the same is true also for another participant, who comes from a different parish. I ask the young man with pink hair if he likes Taizé, and he replies: 'It is free, so...'. They ask me

about my project, and I provide more details. At the end of the conversation I ask if they would like to be interviewed to share their impressions on their pilgrimage experience. They seem genuinely curious and willing to speak, so they accept. I tell them that I will interview them towards the end of the week. Two girls explain that the group is not the same every year, but a few are regular participants (they are among these). We queue to get our meal and eventually sit together in a circle. The leaders and adult participants do not join it; they sit in a separate circle and do not interact with young people.

In the afternoon I have a meeting with the main leader. She tells me that her interest for Taizé dates back to her youth, when she attended the Youth Council. She also took part in what she defines as 'the biggest crossing of the Channel since the Second World War', the pilgrimage to Taizé organized by the Archbishop George Carey. What impressed her as a young person was the Community's international flavour, and its cultural diversity. She was not particularly impressed by the liturgy, as she had grown up in a very similar liturgical environment. Since her youth, she has never stopped visiting Taizé. She organises this pilgrimage every year.

While I talk with her (we are in the adult area), other leaders approach. One of them is an American pastor who works in a seminary. He is leading a group of thirty-five Methodist seminarians. He also organises a Taizé pilgrimage every year.

### *Day 3*

The day starts early at Taizé. At 8:15 am I find myself streaming with dozen sleepy youth to reach the centre of the Community, the Church of Reconciliation, and attend the morning prayer service. Taizé's daily schedule is fairly simple and repetitive. The morning, noon and evening services are the real axis of the organisation of life at the Community. During those times, everything stops and converges towards the same centre. The bells ring and their echo can be heard everywhere around the campus, calling for people to wake up and come.

This morning, the church fills slowly. People look sleepy, as this is usually the least attended of the three daily services. When I arrive, the Brothers have already filled the nave. Brother Alois enters the scene – he is the last to take his seat. Despite the suggestive choreography of white-dressed Brothers marching to take their seats at the centre of nave, headed by new prior, I cannot escape the feeling that there is something missing. It is the aura of sanctity – shaped by what Barthes would probably define as a studied iconography of sainthood – and the build up of expectation that accompanied the entrance of his elderly predecessor, Brother Roger. We start

singing, while young people continue to fill the church. The dominant form of singing is the unison. The Brothers lead from within the crowds, helping and guiding the crowd – but their voices are barely noticeable. From time to time, one of them emerges from the unison with a solo passage. At those times, I would almost be tempted to stop singing, rest, and listen. Is this a representation of Taizé's idea of ministry? Music instruments are not visible, as they constitute an important, yet discreet support for the singing (strings and winds are most recurrently used). The most effective idea I can use to describe the experience of singing at Taizé is probably associated to the idea of unity. Singing as a sensory representation of unity.

[...]

I am sitting next to my youth group, which always meets in a specific place at the church. Some of them participate in the singing. Two girls stay silent; their face would suggest they are simply lost in their thoughts. Another girl does not sing; from time to time she puts her face over her knees. She chats with two other girls. The young man with pink hair is also very quiet. He sits with another female member of the group. They just stare in the space in front of them. The time of silence is about to start now, but part of the group still keeps talking softly.

The young people around me live the singing and the silence in different ways. It seems to me that there is a considerable difference between the Community's intended representation of unity and the very diverse journeys these youth are travelling. Everyone has his own way of occupying this space: some write on a journal, others check their phones (this is one of the places where you can charge your batteries, so many plugs are crowded with phones). Some are immersed in their thoughts, while others follow the singing and the prayers.

[...]

In the afternoon, I have a meeting with the youth leader of another group I was originally supposed to follow. Her pilgrimage initiative aims to revitalise an earlier diocesan programme, a Taizé worship service they used to organise from time to time. By launching this yearly trip to the Community, she hopes to build up interest and resurrect the service, whose attendance has been fading. Pilgrimage participants were recruited through advertising in parishes and schools. In the school where she tried to recruit, Taizé was not necessarily a familiar name, so the idea of a pilgrimage generally did not spark a lot of interest. This implies that most of her participants have been recruited through parish contacts. To promote the initiative she organized Taizé 'tasters' (worship services), but not many attended. As in the case of my youth group, she will

not organize a parallel programme – once arrived, she will simply hand over their youth to the Brothers. The group shares the same camping area, and sleeps in tents.

At this time of the day (afternoon) it is possible to see many youth groups gathered in small group discussions. The constitution of these groups is also what makes practical life at Taizé possible, as they are assigned different jobs (kitchen, bathrooms, snack distribution in the late afternoon, and so on). They also have a further, very important role, as they help young people find friends outside their pilgrimage group. Their composition is very diverse, and they are usually self-directed. Participants choose when to meet during the day, and how to develop their discussions. The role of general supervision is loosely entrusted to their youth leaders, who are expected to check if their young people are actively involved.

During snack time I meet with a girl from my group and we start chatting about my research. She is a student in Modern Languages and has participated in the Erasmus Project with her university. She defines Taizé as ‘the best place for someone interested in practicing foreign languages’. In her view, visiting the Community always feels like being thrown in ‘an international party’.

[...]

At dinner, I arrive early at our meeting place. Three members of the group are already there, chatting. I turn to D. and we start talking. This is her third time at the Community; she buys a Taizé cross pendant for every time she has been there. She wears a necklace with all her Taizé pendants during her weekly retreat, every year, so that she can show others how many times she has been here. When I ask what she likes of Taizé, she says ‘Its tolerance, the fact that nobody cares about who you are, you can just be whatever you want’. I ask D. if she has ever considered participating in Taizé’s ‘week in silence’ programme, and she jokingly replies that the best she could do is spending a night ‘in silence’ (joke). I tell her about a conversation I had with another participants concerning the need to invest her time at Taizé to sort her life out. D. nods in agreement, and the other members of the group also voice out their approval. In their view, however, silence would not be the best vehicle for this kind of pursuit; D. says she needs some noise and music to feel at ease. One of the girls joins the conversation and she adds that she is at her ninth pilgrimage to the Community. She emphasises that she has always chosen to camp in a tent rather than sleeping in the barracks, as only campers live the ‘real’ Taizé experience. She also asks me more about my project, and I give her more details about my

methods and the object of my research. She expresses shock when I speak about the required length of the thesis!

#### *Day 4*

The Community owns a store that is placed next to the church. When the activity programme does not involve conflicts, the store is open and constitutes one of the main attractions. It sells books and souvenirs produced by Taizé (pendants and necklaces, prayer stools, song collections, CDs, artisan pottery, candles, icons, and much more...). I meet two members of my group there. They are buying postcards and tell me that as emails and Internet are not accessible at Taizé, this is the best way to connect with their friends, and a good pastime (one of them has just bought sixteen Community postcards).

It is the afternoon, and around us small groups are gathered on the lawns and in the cafeteria area; other youth walk around. Some are cleaning; others are just relaxing and chatting. People in small groups have a very relaxed attitude: they sit in a circle chatting, laughing and playing. Each group is made of ten to fifteen young people. While going back to the camp, I realise that a very small Internet point is available at the margins of the campus, and young people are patiently queuing to use the few computers available.

I also go into the church to observe what is taking place there, as I hear music. During the afternoon the programme includes choir rehearsals. During prayer services, singers are hidden in a corner of the nave. They are about a hundred, but they are virtually invisible. Their voices support communal singing without breaking the impression of being all equal, all one, in an environment that seems to have abolished hierarchies and divisions. During the rehearsal other young people gather next to the church, in groups of different sizes – they just sit there speaking softly or just listening, while others listen from inside the building. Afternoons are hot, and the church is one of the rare cool places. People go there to write a postcard, lay on the ground and rest, think, or read. Reading is not necessarily connected to an explicitly religious purpose. The girl next to me, for instance, is reading 'Memoirs of a Geisha'. Others are playing with their mobile phones, or simply waiting for them to be re-charged (for those staying in tents, this is a good place to find a plug – many do the same during prayer services).

During the afternoon another place of gathering is the Oyak, where many young people are now enjoying a drink or an ice cream. Youth leaders often use it as a space to meet their groups and check how they are adjusting to the experience.



Some pilgrims spend the afternoon hours visiting the Garden of Silence, at the edge of the campus, where they can walk in nature, chat (discreetly), read, journal, pray, or simply relax.

Most young people I have met have come to Taizé in groups. This is a way for parishes to aggregate young people from different parishes and help them connect. These pilgrimage groups are one of the basic social units around which life at Taizé is organized. A key role is also played by small groups, by which the Community tries to create connections across local pilgrimage groups. Participation in these small groups is mandatory, and kindly but firmly enforced by a discreet staff of volunteers who walk around the campus and invite people to join their activities.

### *Day 5*

... This afternoon, our leader has arranged a meeting between the group and Brother S. at La Morada. She would like young people to have a question time with the Brother. I am also invited, and she introduces me as a researcher. He asks me if I have contacted other members of the Community, and I provide two names of Brothers with whom I have liaised during the months before my trip. The group leader explains the object of my research as dealing with the way young people appropriate Taizé's spirituality. The Brother reacts strongly to her use of the word 'spirituality', as he does not like it. Speaking of spirituality seems to suggest the existence of a separate area of life that we need to 'top up' from time to time. I listen but do not reply to his comments, as I do not want to open a debate and deviate from the objective of the meeting, which aims to let youth ask questions about the Community.

The leader invites her group to speak, and one of the girls asks about Taizé and change. The Brother replies that some things at Taizé have changed over the years, especially in logistic terms; however, he emphasises that outside this area, very little has changed. Some young people point out the fact that the songs are becoming more difficult to sing, both because of language reasons (increasing use of Eastern European languages), and musical complexity. The Brother does not seem to have a clear answer to this remark, so he replies that he is not in charge of writing the music. He turns to B., one of the members of the group, to ask how is retreat is going. B. replies that his small group has decided to try a two-hour experiment with silence (B. particularly appreciates silence, and was initially thinking about choosing the specific programme the Community makes available for this purpose). H. steps into the discussion: it is his first time at Taizé and he particularly appreciates people's friendliness and openness to

others, the possibility to exchange experiences with them and to make new friends. This is something he cannot find in his parish community or in his ordinary life, where people barely talk to each other. The Brother emphasises that Taizé is very much about creating community among people. Another young person asks a question about who is not welcome at Taizé. The answer is that they do try to discourage some groups from coming and advise them to go elsewhere, if the Community feels that they would not be comfortable with some aspects of life at Taizé (silence being an example). Some groups are invited to leave if they do not get involved in the activities. Other young people ask about the Brothers' practical lives: if they have birthday parties, sport activities, a life beyond what they live at the Community, or if they spend all their lives at Taizé. The Brother tries to attenuate the sense of 'extraordinary' living underlying these questions, emphasising that they live very normal lives. He particularly emphasises the idea of lifelong commitment, and he explains that as any Brother, he could be moved somewhere else as part of his service. He also mentions the importance of communal living and the fact that he spends a lot of time travelling around the world.

One of the girls asks him to define the word 'self', as the Brother has repeatedly mentioned the idea of 'finding one's real self'. He replies by asking a new question: 'Do you know what it is?' She replies that she studies Psychology and English, and is interested in the subject. He smiles but he does not answer.

At dinnertime, I join a table of youth leaders. The conversation consists in an exchange of memories and experiences from past trips to Taizé. All these leaders have visited the Community for years, since they were very young. My group leader talks about international Taizé meetings she attended in Prague and London in the 1980s, and also about her participation in the pilgrimage organised by Archbishop Carey. Another leader speaks about a meeting held in Budapest, the excellent logistics (the meeting was attended by eighty thousand participants), and Brother Roger's unexpected arrival in a double decker. Some also speak about the misunderstandings and resistances they have to face when they try to introduce Taizé songs as part of local Church of England liturgies. The impression I have is that many of these leaders are interested in some form of liturgical experimentation and renewal inspired by the Community's style. They all have grown up attending Taizé meetings; the Community seems to have powerfully influenced their faith journey, and they seem anxious to use its resources as a way to innovate liturgy back home. It is interesting, however, that the conversation exclusively revolves on appropriating liturgical elements and styles, but does not refer at all to the theology

and mission underlying it. The young people these leaders bring to Taizé could be the next generation of supporters and promoters of the Community at local level.

### *Day 7*

As the week comes to its close, morning prayer services are generally less attended. The church fills slowly. A young member of my group tells me that as the week unfolds, liturgies start feeling monotonous, and songs become repetitive. The use of so many different languages makes singing particularly difficult. He feels disappointed.

I notice a group of Catholic scouts next to me. Several are attending this week's retreat, but more in general the Catholic presence seems to be very significant. From my exchanges with young people and leaders, I have the strong impression that Taizé has become a refuge for young Christians in a society where religious practice is becoming marginal.

Many youth around me wear Taizé t-shirts or pendants. The number of those wearing this kind of merchandise has constantly increased during the week. Also, many wear t-shirts or other souvenirs of past international meetings organised by the Community in different parts of Europe. Interestingly, pilgrims do not limit themselves to collecting and wearing Taizé memorabilia; they mix and match other objects: Franciscan wooden crosses, and especially items (t-shirts, backpacks) connected to their participation in the Catholic Word Youth Days, souvenirs from the Caminho or from Medjugorje.

## **Pilgrimage to Taizé, Summer 2010 (excerpts)**

### *Day 1*

The group I am involved with this year includes about fifty people. My participation has been introduced and explained in very positive terms, prior to the pilgrimage. A letter with my picture was sent to all young pilgrims; it included information about the project, and specific explanations covering the issues of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Before sending the letter, the group's leaders met to discuss possible issues arising from my presence. They function as a team of five, but three of them carry the main responsibility for the organisation. When I arrive at the departure place, it is clear that everybody knows who I am, and why I am there.

At the meeting point I find eight young people waiting – we are quite in advance. They belong to different age groups (fifteen to twenty-six years old). Their parents accompany most of them.

About twenty minutes before the departure we are told that the local archbishop will be traveling with us. Some 'veterans' of these trips show great enthusiasm at the news. He has accompanied other pilgrimages to Taizé before, and is known for being an easy-going, humorous, and approachable pastor. Two girls at the centre of the parking keep chatting together. One of them is particularly excited because she has finally managed to convince her friend to join the trip for the first time. They both attended the same Anglican boarding school. Only one member of the group is of non-Caucasian origin (Jamaican). While we wait, more participants arrive; female pilgrims are slightly more numerous, but gender-wise the group is fairly balanced. The bus finally arrives and everybody gets on.

Once on the bus, I meet one of the leaders, M. Most of the coordinators of this trip are in their early thirties, younger than the coordinator of my previous Taizé pilgrimage group (she was over fifty). They are five – three men and two women. The oldest of the group is F., a priest in charge of two small parishes. He is extremely friendly, and he introduces himself. We start talking, while the bus begins its journey. He explains that given the size and average age of his parishes (very high), young people are very few and isolated. This annual trip to Taizé is one of the most important youth ministry activities in his planning, as it allows youth to connect, be encouraged by each other's presence, and recharge spiritually.

A second leader, M., also joins us, and emphasises his keen interest in my research. He will do everything possible to support my project and facilitate my task. He has been at Taizé several times, but he explains that the real Taizé 'expert' in the group is his friend and colleague N. Both of them started visiting the Community when they were very young, and have strong connections with it.

N. was already in the bus when it came to pick us up, as he had boarded at another stop on the trip. He warmly welcomes me and also expresses great interest for my project. He says that he will be very attentive to include me in all the activities; during the trip, we often take time to talk.

The group is initially quiet, then starts warming up. They are a noisy, joyful bunch that reminds me very closely of a school group on a tourist trip. Much of their travel time is spent making up jokes, laughing, singing, playing cards or listening to music on their headphones. They have music requests for the driver, and have prepared a playlist to sing together. Their favourites are the Yellow Submarine, Macarena, or themes from the Ghost of the Opera. One of the two groups participating in the trip seems particularly cohesive; the other seems more fragmented, probably also because it includes a wider range of age groups. Overall, however, the climate is

extremely positive. I am particularly impressed by the caring, supportive attitude of the leaders. They are very intentional in including everybody. During one of the stops the three male leaders introduce me to the archbishop, who asks multiple questions about my project. M. and N. inform him that their dioceses have decided to support my research. The archbishop listens to their explanations with clear interest. He seems a very warm person, and often makes jokes.

When we resume our trip, H. joins me and we have a long conversation. He explains that there is no follow up or a precise pastoral strategy behind these pilgrimages. Most of what happens after a trip to Taizé is related to the informal connections young people create with their peers.

[...]

At our arrival at Taizé, N. introduces me to Brother S., his liaison with the Community. As soon as we set the camp, the leaders gather the group and introduce everybody to everybody. Young people are invited not to isolate themselves, especially during the first days; they are also encouraged to take good care of the other members of the group, especially when they detect a possible problem. Leaders are very intentional in pursuing the goal of creating community within the group. They suggest taking meals together under one of the tents in the cafeteria area. Differently from other leaders, they have no intention to follow the Community's policy in terms of age groups organization, and attend the adults' programme. They also introduce me again to the group. I share a few thoughts about the importance of a research on young people at Taizé, and invite all youth in the target age to participate in the interviews. Almost everybody enthusiastically accepts.

The fact that youth leaders and young people camp together, and none sleeps in the barracks, immediately appears to be an important factor for the unity of the group. Young people inhabit that space as if it was a little village, a 'home' where everybody can connect with everybody. This is without doubt an advantage also for my activity as a researcher. The general attitude is extremely friendly.

Another significant difference with my previous experience is that in this case leaders participate in the youth programme. This is extremely important for my work as well, as it allows me to be truly part of the life of the group, in all its aspects. More in general, leaders seem to actively negotiate their way of interpreting the Community's rules, whereas the leader of my first group tended to obey them closely.

Rain all night! Our camp was severely affected, and everyone had to work hard to avoid the tents flying away, carried by the wind, or being filled with water. Despite the bad night, everybody is in a good mood this morning. As we walk to the church for the morning service, some participants come to talk to me about being interviewed. A few underage youth express their frustration for being excluded from the sample.

The church is packed. Many young people of my pilgrimage group sit together. Not everybody participates in the morning Eucharist/Communion service, and groups of young people leave as soon as it starts. The majority of the attendees participate in the Eucharistic service, which is performed at the very centre of the church; only a minority takes the Communion, which is distributed next to the icon of the Resurrection. A third option is also offered: simple bread, for those who do not recognise themselves in any of these traditions, but still would like to participate.

[...]

Monday is a difficult day, as it represents the start of a new cycle. The first meeting of the day includes a long organizational introduction. People are invited to seat in an area assigned on the basis of their spoken language. There is a large Spanish-speaking group; Polish youth are less numerous, and generally speak English. Hungarians follow a separate, translated programme. A few young people come from Croatia, Latvia, Ukraine, Russia, and Lithuania; a few dozens are from Italy and France. The largest groups come from Germany and Portugal.

Brother S. is in charge of both organizing the small groups and leading Bible introductions. He opens the meeting by recommending youth to pay attention to each other's cultural differences, make new friends, and take care of everyone. He also asks for Taizé's 'veterans' to help first-time visitors. He is very good at making people laugh, and shows a good sense of humour.

The Brother addresses part of his presentation to those who are not 'used to be in a church'. Volunteers will help these people be mindful of silence, and will invite them to be quiet while in the church. Taizé veterans are expected to actively cooperate and help new pilgrims to adjust to the Community's ethos and uses. Brother S. defines Taizé as 'one of the rare places where people who have never been in a church are intentionally included', but this requires some form of 'education'. Each group is required to appoint a few representatives that will act as a link with the Community and keep the others informed about daily events.

Brother S. also particularly emphasizes the importance of participating in small group discussions, after the Bible introductions. Beyond their catechetical purpose, the aim of these

groups is to provide a context where young people can be trained to live as a community. For this reason, they need to be taken very seriously: 'Be accountable, tell others if you can't come, but don't stop talking to them and try to build the group as your family here. We need to practice sharing and openness more than you think'.

From tomorrow onward the following schedule is suggested: after the Bible introductions, participants should spend time alone to write ideas and prepare for their small group's discussion; young people are also invited to pray prior to these meetings. Their schedule should not conflict with the need for youth to participate in practical work and support the Community's organization.

### *Day 3*

Today marks the beginning of my cycle of interviews. Almost all members of the group belonging to the target age group have accepted to be involved. In the afternoon workshops have been scheduled as part of the programme, although only a minority of young people attend them. The themes range from the study of the spirituality of the Early Fathers, to the meaning of icons in Orthodox spiritual practice, to Muslim-Christian dialogue. Small groups continue to take place at the same as the workshops, and I join mine. Today the conversation partly deviates from the topic explored during the Bible introduction. We deal with the subject of personal, ordinary spirituality. One of the participants, a young lady, shares with us that she does not usually pray, and that for her the closest thing to prayer is reading, listening to music, or spending time peacefully, on her own. A young German girl who studies theology replies that it is very difficult for her to find any functional analogies between prayer and other practices. Prayer is unique, a time carved out from the flow of life. She struggles to achieve at home the same intensity of prayer she can enjoy here, but she thinks it would be important for her to find some space for prayer in her ordinary life, as this practice has a most significant place in her life. Another German young woman emphasises that while at home you have to make conscious choices to carve time out for prayer, at Taizé this is naturally included in everybody's daily schedule. Comparisons between the two situations are therefore impossible. Her friend replies that in her view prayer is like relationships – it should feel natural. She wonders, however, if rituals could help to orient her towards it. One of the female youth leaders of my group is also part of the conversation, and she highlights how for her the very thought of prayer as 'natural' part of life is very difficult to conceive. She is an Anglican vicar, and as such prayer

feels as a mandatory part of her work schedule. She also emphasises that prayer should not be limited to words, but could also be expressed through actions. The German young woman replies that sometimes God accepts a prayer that just acknowledges the impossibility for the person involved to pray. Another participant jumps into the conversation and offers her testimony. She is a teacher and uses Taizé prayers at the school where she works. Pupils are very interested. Yet, it is different to be at the Community – so many people have never visited Taizé and sometimes it feels like this inner quiet is difficult to achieve elsewhere.

#### *Day 4*

My interviews continue at a good pace... Today, after lunch, I had a conversation with some participants about their experience with small groups. Their opinions are very diverse: some take them seriously, others consider them as a time they can spend playing and chit-chatting. Many appreciate the element of experiential exchange they often include. Bible introductions are rarely taken into consideration as a topic of discussion, and in some cases young people feel that conversations become shallow and difficult to manage...

#### *Day 5*

Today I had two interviews. So far all of them have been rich and insightful. This afternoon, however, my interview with H. was particularly difficult. The life experiences she is trying to come to terms with, here at Taizé, are extremely painful for her to articulate. She was divided between the desire to open up and the struggle of translating into words feelings and thoughts she had buried in silence for a long time. I felt deeply grateful for her effort to share that moment with me. She was extraordinarily open and deep, an attitude young people from this pilgrimage group have repeatedly manifested during their interviews.

[...]

In the evening I have a long conversation with one of the leaders, N. He has visited Taizé every year for the last eighteen years. The Community represents a very important landmark in his faith journey. His way of experiencing the time spent at Taizé has changed over the years, as he has grown up and become more mature. The relationships he has built during his pilgrimages to Taizé have influenced his life choices and deeply shaped the way he believes. During a week spent in silence, for instance, he met a young Kenyan. They were both in their late teen years. The only thing he knew about him was his name. During the trip back home,



they spoke about N.'s desire to become an Anglican priest, and he shared his journey to discern his calling to ministry. About twenty years later, N. is indeed a priest, while his friend is a nurse, a very prayerful man, and his daughter's godfather. 'Today the Church is so busy in strategies and things to do, yet it should re-centre its way of being around Christianity's essential foundation, which is expressed in the form of community practiced at Taizé.' In his view, Taizé's key message revolves around the idea of dwelling in Jesus. He repeats a quote from Brother Roger: 'Prayer is the utmost form of responsibility'. Then he shares the story of a monastery founded by Romanian monks, who chose to start by building a prayer room.

Despite all the structural and organisational concerns that animate contemporary church debates, the current emergence of charismatic groups and Fresh Expression experiments underlies a genuine concern for making God present. 'You can't quench the Spirit of God', he says, 'or it will flow elsewhere: it's a lesson we need to learn.' He emphasises the need for the Church to make space for these spiritual quests and listen to people's thirst for God. He feels very strongly about this subject.

### *Day 6*

As the week approaches its end, less people attend morning prayer services and the Bible introductions. Despite the bells calling pilgrims to converge towards the church, our camp is silent and young people continue to sleep. During the afternoon, youth choose between different options: participating in small group discussions, helping with different practical tasks, shopping for their last souvenirs at the Community's store, relaxing at the Oyak, having a walk, chatting with friends, or queuing at the only small Internet point available on Taizé's grounds. During this last afternoon, many choose to spend time with their small groups. I have repeatedly asked my pilgrimage companions about their experience with these groups. In their view, this space is used in very different ways. Some people have real discussions (generally not on the subject explored during the Bible introductions, but on topics connected to young people's concerns), other prefer to spend time chatting, getting to know each other, or playing. Small groups are organized by age range; adults have their own separate groups.

Morning Bible introductions are organized according to the same age criterion. Different Brothers take charge of selected age groups. The theme remains the same, but is developed differently (in our case, it has focused on reading the Gospel of John).

## *Day 7*

It is the last full day the group spends at Taizé. During the past days, I have been very busy with interviews, but today the entire group is busy packing. A new wave of pilgrims is just arriving, and a big group of Italians is already roaming around, looking for a good place to set their tents. At the store, youth seem particularly interested in prayer stools. During the week, I have seen the number of youth carrying them to the church constantly increase. Pilgrims use them during prayer services, to imitate the Brothers' prayer posture. Stools are also good for other uses: some young people have them signed, and quickly they become all covered with signatures of old and new friends with whom they have shared their Taizé experience. As some participants tell me, after the pilgrimage they will bring them home to be both a reminder of a significant experience, and a resource to structure a space of prayer and reflection.

While I wait for lunch, I meet one of the female leaders of my pilgrimage group, and we start talking. The day before, one of the underage participants shared with me his scepticism about Taizé. In his perception, many young people visit the Community not so much for spiritual purposes, but rather to meet other youth, enjoy a cheap vacation, and maybe have a short flirt. He pointed out examples of this 'underground' aspect of life at Taizé, and shared his struggle, as a teenager. Having to deal with a context where so many girls behaved in what he perceived as a sexually 'aggressive' way was very difficult, at his age (and with his hormones, he said!). His best friend, a girl, seemed to completely agree with him, and mentioned how much time girls spent in the restrooms taking care of their make up, or dressing in ways that were probably not best suited for a camping situation.

The female group leader was not surprised to hear about this feedback. She agreed that young people's purposes in visiting Taizé are not always predominantly spiritual (she uses the word 'sassy' to define some of their attitudes). Still, she argues, most youth attend three daily prayer services and are respectful of the place where they are hosted. She also shares her daughter's experience: she has an atheist boyfriend, and feels that this is one of the few religious places he would be happy to visit. He enjoys the silence, but would rather avoid crossing paths with 'Bible bashers'. She has some very conservative Christians in her group, and including them in the trip has come with a price: sacrificing any conversation on potentially divisive themes.

Still, she says, Taizé is far from being 'ecumenical' in its demographic make up. Her small group is made of female teachers (she has chosen to attend the adult programme); most of them are either clergy wives, or recent divorcees who are trying to recover from a marriage break-up. In

her view, the Community's audience represents a very specific cross-section of the general population. It mostly includes university students or middle class, educated youth and adults. Very few Black people come to visit Taizé; the evangelical charismatic component of the Church of England is almost totally absent. I highlight that in our group a few participants come from a charismatic background, but that the great majority is Caucasian and educated. I also mention that, based on my interviews, the only participant who could be defined as a true Taizé sympathiser is A., who is also the only non Caucasian member of the group. All the others seem to be visiting the Community for reasons having little or nothing to do with its stated mission or theology, and are rather related to personal existential and spiritual quests. She confirms this understanding. In her view, A. sincerely believes that the world can and should be changed, and has found that Taizé could work as an outlet for his desire of commitment. She also thinks that what Taizé tries to do – bringing Christianity back to its basic, practical foundations, which are prayer, compassion and solidarity – could provide a way through which dialogue can be built, even in difficult political contexts like the Gaza or Irish crises.

We go through food distribution, and when we join the rest of the group to eat our lunch, we realise that some parents have joined us. They have come to pick their children up and continue their vacation.

[...]

On this last day, the church is a real crossroad. People come and go, busy dismantling their tents, gathering their things, making sure they have a Facebook contact for all their new friends and, in some special cases, the mobile phone numbers of those with which they have decided to continue a relationship after this week at Taizé.

As we prepare to get on the bus, Brother S. makes sure he has a word for every youth, and once more he thanks those who have helped out with cleaning and other practical tasks. Finally, we leave the Community and start our journey back to the United Kingdom.